

A woman with dark hair styled in a bun with white floral accessories is shown from the back, looking out over a dramatic coastal landscape. She is wearing a deep red, long-sleeved Victorian-style dress with a lace collar and a matching belt. The background features a rugged coastline with cliffs, a body of water with white-capped waves, and a cloudy sky. The overall scene is romantic and scenic.

ARIA NORTON

A LADY'S
ROMANTIC
JOURNEY

A Lady's Romantic Journey

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

ARIA NORTON

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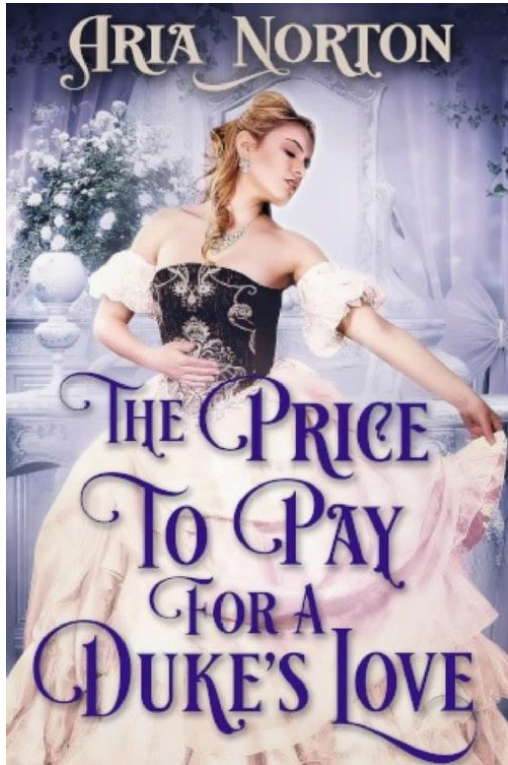
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A Lady's Romantic Journey

Introduction

Madeline Spencer, a high-spirited young woman, has her life turned upside down when she discovers a shocking truth about her past. The man she thought to be her father proves to actually not be her birth one, so she sets on a journey across the world to explore her past. Her troubles do not end with her discovering she is the daughter of an english duke, as his closest -and very charming- confidant is doubting her identity. To her surprise, the Viscount seeks to remove her from the duke's life, but unfortunately for him, she is not one to give up easily. As she retraces her mother's steps and repeatedly runs into the very man she would rather avoid, she finds herself strangely intrigued by the insufferable Viscount. Could this be just a coincidence or is it fate? Can she look past his interference and allow her budding feelings for him to fully blossom?

Gregory Montgomery, Viscount of Blithely, has had his hands full taking care of his mother and sisters and is looking forward to finally concentrating on his own life. Little did he know that a beautiful American woman, claiming to be the Duke's daughter, would add a twist to this life... Despite his apparent desire to get rid of her, as he believes the duke's real daughter has perished at sea, Gregory seems incapable of denying her company. Everytime he sees her, he finds himself taken aback by this unstoppable force of a woman, and this irks him to no end. When he begins to doubt his initial belief about

her, Gregory finds himself at a crossroad: he must either let his heart trust the woman he just met or protect the man he has looked up to for years...

With so many obstacles to overcome, they find themselves at a heart-breaking dead end. Madeline is driven by her determination of proving the truth, but Gregory is blinded by his sense of righteousness. Will their love survive the encounter of their contrasting motives? Will they be able to put everything aside and be together, or will their pride keep them apart?

Prologue

England, 1795

Hyacinth's eyes travelled to her husband's ugly-looking grandfather clock, her belly tightening as she watched the minute hand land on twelve. It was time to leave. Reaching for her daughter's hand, Hyacinth kissed the pudgy little palm.

“It's time to go, Charlie.”

Charlotte's little face looked up, her eyes serious and questioning. “Where we going?”

Hyacinth knew her daughter didn't like to be disturbed when playing with her teacups and stuffed bears, but this couldn't be put off. *We cannot be late, or we'll miss the ship. Everything must be timed perfectly.*

“We're going to see Lady Eloise. Do you recall that I told you we would visit her today?”

“Oh, yes,” the three-year-old replied, her face brightening. “I like Aunt Lois. Will we have cake?”

Hyacinth smiled. Not many people got away with calling Lady Eloise an aunt or shortening the baroness' name to Lois, but Charlotte had a way with people. Hyacinth's smile dropped a smidgen at the reality of

their situation. They were not going to Lady Eloise, and neither would Charlotte get her cake. Instead, they were about to embark on a risky journey that could mean their freedom if everything went well. Hyacinth didn't want to imagine what would happen if this plan failed.

“Yes, dear,” Hyacinth lied. “But we must hurry, or we'll be late.”

Charlotte would undoubtedly be disappointed, but it would only last a little while. *Whereas I cannot stand another minute of this life.*

Hyacinth had already sent her handmaiden ahead with a few of her belongings under the cloak of darkness. It wouldn't do for the other servants to know what they were up to, as they would surely report it to John and spoil everything. Fiona had left the day before with her daughter Becca to supposedly see a family member, when in fact she was biding her time.

The handmaiden had appeared that same night after the stroke of midnight to take a few of Hyacinth's belongings to temporary lodgings before boarding the ship today. Hyacinth was confident John wouldn't notice a few jewellery pieces missing, money taken from the safe, or a small valise filled with some necessities until it was too late. The rest of what Hyacinth would need for her journey would be provided once they made it onto the ship. *If we make it there.*

Nightmares about John finding out about the plan had kept her awake every night, but that didn't lessen her resolve to run away from this suffocating marriage and begin anew in a far-off land.

“Can I take Mr Wiggles and Claribel with me?” her daughter asked.
“Aunt Lois has no toys.”

Having extra baggage would undoubtedly slow them down, even if the baggage were two stuffed bears. Still, Hyacinth didn't want to deny Charlotte some comfort for the long journey ahead.

“You can choose one bear, not two.”

“Only one?” Charlotte protested. “But they will be lonely, Mama!”

Hyacinth's eyes crept to the clock, alarmed at how quickly time was passing. They didn't have time to argue over silly things! *I still don't know how I'm going to explain everything to her. How do you tell a three-year-old child she is leaving the only home she has ever known, and will begin a new life in a foreign country?* The little girl would ask a dozen questions that Hyacinth had no immediate answers to. *It is not as though I can speak of my marital problems.* What did a child know about being married to a possessive man who was old enough to be her father?

Hyacinth had only been seventeen when her uncle had forced her into the marriage. She had never seen it coming and had been wholly unprepared. It should never have happened, but no one had been about to save her from her uncle's crooked ways.

Uncle Edgar had become her guardian after Hyacinth's parents' untimely death when she was just twelve. The man had primarily left her to her own devices as he had had no time to spare for a grieving daughter. One day, soon after her seventeenth birthday, Uncle Edgar had arrived at her parents' country estate (which he had fortunately not sold to pay his gambling debts due to a clause in her parents' will) and declared he had found Hyacinth a suitable husband.

Of course, Hyacinth had been outraged. How dare her uncle spring this on her without at least a formal courtship to see if she and the suitor were compatible? When Hyacinth had finally met John Russell, Duke of Claverset, on their wedding day, it was if the very life had seeped out of her. *I was powerless then, but I refuse to submit my daughter to the same fate.*

Hyacinth's only light in this horrible marriage was Charlotte. At first, she had not wanted to be pregnant and had hated her unborn baby, but when Charlotte had uttered her first gusty cry, Hyacinth had felt an inexplicable pull and protectiveness towards the wailing infant. It was in that precise moment she had vowed to protect the child from all danger, even if that danger was Charlotte's father.

It would be easier if John were indifferent towards his daughter, but he's completely smitten with her. Hyacinth's husband spared nothing in giving Charlotte everything a child could ever want. But what would happen once Charlotte was of marrying age? Would John marry her off to some old man like Hyacinth's uncle did to her? There was no telling what could happen in the future, and Hyacinth was taking no chances.

Crouching before her daughter, Hyacinth took both hands in hers. "Charlie, are two bears necessary?"

"Yes, Mama! I don't want them to be lonely."

Hyacinth sighed. "Very well. We shall take the two bears, but no more. Quickly gather them so we can go."

Charlotte's face lit up as she scooped up the soft toys, tucking them under one pudgy arm.

"I'm ready, Mama."

"Good," said Hyacinth, unable to withhold a smile. "Let's go."

Charlotte placed her tiny hand in Hyacinth's palm, her adorable impish face looking up at her with all the trust in the world. Hyacinth bit her lower lip, a feeling of guilt washing over her. Was she doing the right thing by taking her daughter away from everything she had ever known? *The path I've decided to take affects us both, but I'm doing it for our future. We will have no happiness in England.*

Taking a deep breath, Hyacinth walked towards the door, her legs trembling with every step. *John will likely kill me once he realises that not only have I run away, but I've taken our daughter with me.* There was no way Hyacinth would leave Charlotte behind. Never.

"Are you going somewhere, dear?"

Hyacinth paused, her heart hammering against her chest. *I thought he was locked away in his study!* She had been counting on leaving the house without his knowledge. Hyacinth turned to her husband, her mind going blank when she encountered his light blue gaze. What was she supposed to say in such a situation? She had rehearsed answers with Fiona for days, covering every possible problem that could come up. *I cannot remember a single thing!* Thankfully, Charlotte unknowingly came to her rescue.

“We're going to Aunt Lois, Papa, and Mama is letting me take Mr Wiggles and Claribel with me!”

“Oh, is that so, my Little Faerie? Are you going to leave your poor Papa today?”

At the word 'leave', Hyacinth was shaken out of her stupor. “NO!” she denied a tad too forcibly. At John's raised eyebrows, she cleared her throat, touching a finger to her damp upper lip. “What I mean is that we are not leaving you but stepping out for the day.”

John's greying eyebrows came together with a slight smile. “I know that, my love. I only said it in jest.”

Hyacinth inwardly cringed at the term of endearment. It didn't matter that they had been married for five years, it still bothered her. Masking her distaste, she placed a hand on her daughter's shoulder.

“Darling, why don't you give your Papa a kiss before we leave?”

Charlotte didn't need to be told twice as she ran towards her father, launching herself at him. John caught her easily, throwing her into the air with a laugh. Charlotte gave a delighted squeal, urging her father to throw her higher. Guilt once again crept up on Hyacinth. Watching father and daughter together made her feel terrible for separating them, but she had to.

This happiness Charlotte feels will not last forever. One day, she'll grow up and realise that she is a woman with no rights. I want to keep her from falling into the same terrible fate I was forced into. Hyacinth wanted to

start afresh in the New World and wanted her daughter to see more of the world than the four corners of a house. Marriage to the wrong man would dash Charlotte's every dream and stifle her imagination. At least in America, she would have the freedom to choose. *I'll make sure of it.*

“Dear?” came John's voice. “Is everything all right?”

Hyacinth blinked. Had her mind wandered off again? She seemed to be doing that a lot lately, especially since she first contacted her long-lost family in America. *Mama never once mentioned anything about her siblings who live in America. I found this knowledge out quite by accident.* It was Hyacinth's American family who had helped her plan this escape and was awaiting her arrival. They, too, condemned Uncle Edgar's actions and wished her to be rescued from her trapping life.

“Hyacinth?” John called again.

“Oh, uh, sorry, John. I've had many things on my mind lately. We must take your leave, I'm afraid, or Lady Eloise will be most annoyed by our tardiness.”

John's speculating gaze remained, but he nodded. “Of course. Punctuality is important. Has Pierce brought the carriage around already?”

And there lay the other piece of the plan she had to explain away. Hyacinth was not travelling with Pierce, as the man would realise something was amiss. Instead, another carriage ride had been organised under the guise of it being Lady Eloise's personal transport.

"Lady Eloise has arranged a carriage for us today," said Hyacinth. "She purchased a new one, and I wished to be the first guest rider in it."

"I did not know you were interested in such things," John mused.

"It has attractive features inside created by a master carpenter. You know how I love anything intricately carved and embellished."

"Indeed, I do." John smiled. "Why don't I accompany you both and I can see it for myself?"

That was the last thing Hyacinth needed. *One look inside the carriage, and he'll know I was lying.*

"Perhaps when we return," Hyacinth argued gently. "We truly do not wish to be delayed any longer."

Thankfully, John didn't insist any more. "I understand, my love. Enjoy your day out," he said, coming to kiss her cheek.

Hyacinth flinched ever so slightly, but John saw it. He sighed, pulling back before his lips made contact with her skin.

"Please be back by three," John cautioned. "There's reportedly a storm today, and I do not wish either of you to be caught in it."

It was just like John to put a time restraint on her. Hyacinth had already observed the weather and knew there would be some rain, but nothing to warrant a storm. *He merely wishes to keep me under rule and thumb. He hates me to leave his sight.* Fortunately, John respected Lady Eloise and would have no problem with Hyacinth visiting the woman. But I'm not, am I?

"Very well. We'll do as you say," she lied. "Come along, Charlie darling. We don't want to keep Lady Eloise waiting."

Charlotte skipped to her, taking Hyacinth's outstretched hand. Looking at her husband for the last time, her lips stretching into a rare smile, Hyacinth gave her parting words.

"Goodbye, John."

His eyes took on a puzzled look, but he raised his hand. "I shall see you both later, my darlings. Do give Lady Eloise my regards."

"Of course. Come, Charlie."

Hyacinth walked to the front door, not looking back once. For the first time since this plan was put together, she felt confident and optimistic. *I'm going to make it.* Come this time tomorrow, she and her daughter would be long gone, and there would be nothing John could do about it.

John watched his wife and daughter walk away, feeling a sense of uneasiness at their departure. Why was he feeling so odd? That odd sensation of impending doom had hovered over him for some days

now, but he had shrugged it away. There was absolutely no reason to feel uncomfortable with his wife going to see Lady Eloise. Hyacinth was good friends with the woman and often called on her.

“There's nothing to worry about, you old fool,” he scolded himself. “They will be back in several hours.”

John returned to his study and remained there for much of the day. When three o'clock came and went without sign of Hyacinth or Charlotte, alarm bells rang in his head.

“No, no. I shouldn't be too hasty in jumping to conclusions. I'm certain they're on their way. Perhaps this rain has slowed them down.”

It wasn't raining heavily, but anyone worth their salt as a driver knew how precious their passengers were and should drive carefully anyway. Even a little bit of rain could cause hazardous roads. Hyacinth and Charlotte were everything to John, and he would destroy any person who put their lives in danger.

“I should give it another half hour or so. They should turn up by then.”

John paced the length of his study, his pocket watch in hand. His steward came in moments later, his face hardly able to conceal his concern.

“Your Grace, should I send Pierce to meet Her Grace and Lady Russell on the way?”

John knew what Nigel was saying even if he hadn't said it. "You also believe something has happened, don't you?"

"It's best not to jump to conclusions, Your Grace. I can send Pierce to look on the usual routes to Lady Eloise's house. I'm confident he'll find them."

Nigel did not sound so sure, but John appreciated his optimism. "Very well. Send Pierce if you think it necessary."

He, too, refused to show his alarm, but John was stressing. Nigel bowed and left, his absence allowing John's fears to swim back up to the surface. It wasn't like Hyacinth to return an hour later than the given time.

Early on in their marriage, John explained how imperative it was that she obeyed him in all things. Edgar Powell had told him how 'wild' his niece could be and how she needed a firm hand to guide her along the right path. As smitten as he was by his wife, John knew he had to ensure her obedience to avoid future problems, such as behavioural problems or seeking affairs with other men. It had not escaped John's notice how men had coveted his wife, men who were much younger and better-looking than him. Keeping Hyacinth away from the public's eye for the first year of their marriage had ensured a docile and respectful wife, but at times John wondered if he had clipped her wings instead.

Hyacinth had been a vibrant young woman when he first saw her. It had been at a party given by one of his business associates who resided deep in the countryside. It wasn't only John who had noticed how beautiful she was as it seemed every young man at that party had wanted to dance with her.

I watched her the entire night, captivated by her charm and liveliness. I had never seen a more beautiful creature in all my life.

When John met Hyacinth's uncle that same night, it seemed to be fate. Edgar had spoken of his endeavour to find his niece a husband, and John had jumped at the chance to call such a delightful creature his wife.

I never thought I would ever fall in love again after I lost my Isabella and unborn child, but I was wrong. However, foolishly believing my young wife might grow to love me as Isabella did was wrong as well. I seem to only disgust her.

Had that not been apparent by the way Hyacinth had flinched when he had wanted to kiss her earlier today? John was twenty-two years older than his wife and had nothing in common with her. Yet, he loved her with all his being.

I know some people have whispered about my pathetic attempts to please my wife, or how unsuited we are, but I do not care in the slightest for their judgements.

When Hyacinth fell pregnant with Charlotte, John had pampered her and probably smothered her with attention and care. His wife had seemed more annoyed than pleased, but that had not lessened his need to make her feel comfortable and cherished. Hyacinth had refused for him to be present at Charlotte's birth, so he had listened at the door awaiting the cry of his child. John could still remember his fear when complications had arisen, and the midwife had said in no uncertain terms that he should prepare for the worst.

I never prayed so hard in my life as I did that day. When she and the babe pulled through, I vowed never to touch her again.

John's relatives often questioned him about trying for a son as he needed an heir, but he loved his wife too much to put her through such trauma again.

Charlotte is my heir, as far as I'm concerned. She'll have all the rights my son would have had.

She may not inherit his title, but she would never be denied her birth right as his daughter. John was a wealthy man, making Charlotte a prime target for fortune hunters one day. Even if she were to marry, he would ensure she kept her inheritance to avoid greedy men from taking it.

Should anything happen to me, Hyacinth will be well taken care of.

But what if something should happen to her? John looked at the pocket watch clenched in his fist, his heart growing heavy with every tick. Half an hour had passed since Nigel had sent Pierce to look for Hyacinth and Charlotte, and despite the panic rising within him, John fought to remain positive.

“I should never have let them go. There has to be a reason why I've felt so uneasy for days.”

John would never forgive himself if something happened to his wife

and daughter.

An hour later, Nigel appeared with Pierce, the driver's hat in hand as he twisted it this way and that.

"Well?" John asked. "Where are they? Did you find them?"

Pierce looked at Nigel as though asking for permission. The man's eyes were full of dread and worry; he seemed scared to speak of his news. A knot immediately formed in John's belly as his knees grew weak.

"It is not good news, is it?" he asked. "Where are my wife and daughter?"

"Yer Grace," the driver began, his commoner's accent thick with fear. "I was not able to find Her Grace or Lady Russell."

John closed his eyes, his hand going to his temple when his world grew hazy. Again? Had he lost another wife and child again? *No, no, that's not what Pierce said. There is no reason to jump to conclusions.*

"Perhaps you should sit down, Your Grace," Nigel suggested.

John shook his head, his eyes opening. "No, I'm fine. Really. Did you go to Lady Eloise's house to see if they were there?"

“They never arrived, Yer Grace,” the driver explained. “Lady Eloise was not aware of their arrival today.”

John could hear what Pierce was saying, but he failed to understand it. “What do you mean?”

“Your Grace, the Duchess did not arrange to meet with Lady Eloise,” said Nigel. “She had to have gone somewhere else.”

“But where?!” John bellowed. “Where can a woman and child disappear to? Did you ask anyone if they had seen them? Who was the driver who took them? Did you find out any of these things?”

John watched his driver flinch, but his steward remained calm. Nigel was used to his outbursts and rarely reacted to them.

“Pierce did indeed do all these things, Your Grace,” Nigel answered. “He was not able to find anyone who had seen Her Grace pass by, although he did ask everyone he imagined could have noticed her. Only one old gentleman mentioned he might have seen the Duchess on her way to the docks.”

“The docks?” said John. “That can't be right. Why on earth would she go there?”

The only reason a person would go to the docks, other than to work, was to board a ship. John stumbled backwards, bumping into his desk. No, no, no, no, no. There was simply no way Hyacinth would have taken his daughter and left him. But what if... The way she had said goodbye to him had seemed strangely final, but John had shrugged

that off. *I don't know what's happening, but I want my wife and daughter found.*

“I want every male servant to search the whole of London and its outskirts,” he commanded. “Nigel, I would like you to enquire at the docks and find out if Hyacinth could have gone there- we must leave no stone unturned.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” said Nigel. “I’ll ready everyone and get going.”

It was already late afternoon, but John did not care. He wanted them found at all costs.

It took three agonising months before John found out what became of his wife and child. Hyacinth had indeed boarded a ship bound for America, but it had been caught in a violent tempest along the way. Everyone on board had perished, and John was never the same again.

Chapter 1

America, 22 years later

Breakfast at the Spencer House was never a quiet affair. Madeline reached out her hand to grab a pot of jam before it landed on the floor, ruffling her little brother's hair.

"Bailey, throwing a ball during meal-times is not allowed- you know this. Now, sit down and have your oatmeal. Would you like some honey with it?"

The seven-year-old boy grinned at her, showing his missing tooth. "Good catch, Maddy! You're faster than Lawrence!"

Lawrence scowled at his younger brother. "At least I have all my teeth."

Bailey's smile died. "Maddy! He's teasing again!"

"He's the one that started it," Lawrence countered, reaching for a slice of toast. "I just gave him a taste of his own medicine."

Madeline sighed. "This is precisely why I said to leave your playtime outside the meal room, Bailey. And you, Lawrence, you should be a little nicer to your younger brother. If I remember correctly, you also went through a time of missing teeth."

Both boys looked at her, a pink stain appearing along the top of their cheeks. Timothy, the eldest of the brothers, walked in and paused as he took in the scene.

"They were quarrelling again, weren't they?" he asked her. "I don't think we've had a peaceful breakfast or any other meal since Mother..."

The young man winced, growing quiet. Madeline felt the invisible dip in everyone's mood as she looked at her brothers' sombre faces. It had come as a shock to the family when their mother contracted pneumonia after a horse ride last fall.

What followed next were two weeks of high emotions, fears, and tears as their mother's condition worsened. It had been shocking and terrifying to witness their vibrant and lively mother become a shell of her former self. No one had expected pneumonia to take firm control in such a short amount of time. Madeline had been the rock of the family, comforting her brothers and father as best she could.

Although everyone had cautioned her to stay away from her mother, Madeline had not been able to. She had helped the servants nurse her mother, feeding her and emptying out the bedpans when needed. People were worried that Madeline would contract the sickness as well, but that had been the least of her worries.

Fortunately, Madeline did not grow ill, remaining by her mother's side until the end. Strangely, her mother's last words had been *'please, forgive me for what I did'*. Madeline had assumed her mother meant contracting pneumonia, but her gut instinct had told her no, it was something else. When she wished to ask her mother what she was

talking about, it was too late.

Spencer House went into mourning for at least a month, but since the household had to continue to run, Madeline had made the decision to leave her own house and take over her mother's duties. After all, her two youngest brothers needed minding, and her father hadn't a clue to the needs of a household. Timothy, the eldest son at eighteen, tried to pretend that he was strong and did not need anyone, but Madeline had minded him all the same.

"Cheer up, everyone," she said. "Mama wouldn't want us moping about. She would want to see us enjoying life. You know how she adored seizing every opportunity to live and would expect us to do the same. Why don't we all take a seat and have our breakfast? Cook has gone to too much trouble for us not to enjoy it. Where is Papa?"

"Right here," her father said, striding into the room. "I had some business to attend to first thing in the morning. Would you pour me some coffee, Maddy?"

"Of course, Papa," she answered. "Did everything go well?"

"As well as can be, but let us not discuss work at the table. Where is my newspaper?"

Bailey jumped to fetch it, handing it to their father as the older man settled into his chair at the head of the table. Madeline poured the terribly bitter beverage the Spencer men loved so much, wrinkling her nose at the strong smell. Like her mother, Madeline had never been able to grow accustomed to the hot drink, preferring a good cup of tea. Her brothers often raked her over the coals about it, calling her the least patriotic person in all of America. *If that means never having to*

see, drink, or smell that horrible black beverage, then I'll take that title.

Blocking her nose and breathing through her mouth, she brought the coffee to her father, kissing his cheek in greeting.

“How did you sleep?” she asked. “Did the hot milk, lavender and honey help?”

Ever since her mother's death some months ago, Madeline's father found it challenging to get a good night's sleep. Experience had taught her that a Spencer man on little sleep could be a handful, old or young!

“It worked like a charm,” her father admitted. “And it didn't taste as vile as the other concoctions. Has Cook included cornbread this morning? I would like a slice with a thick spread of butter.”

Madeline observed her father closely. He appeared to be in a good mood. *Perhaps the warm night drink helped better than I thought it would.*

“Sausages, cornbread, omelettes, fried potatoes, and wheat muffins,” Madeline recited.

She had been up early this morning helping Cook in the kitchen. She didn't have to, and it was in fact, frowned upon for a person of her social status, but she enjoyed doing menial tasks to take her mind off the loss of her mother.

The Spencers were one of the wealthiest families in America and held much prestige in the public eye, but most people were aware of Madeline's eccentric nature and let her be. It wasn't odd to find her helping the stable boy with the horses or assisting Mr Hardwick in the garden. Madeline also had an animal sanctuary on her property, and was hands-on with feeding and bathing the animals.

"Delicious," her father commented. "Timothy, I'll need you to come with me to the offices today. You haven't got anything planned for the day, have you?"

Even if he did, Timothy wouldn't say so. He was the perfect sibling of the family, the one who never had a hair out of place. Madeline did not know where her brother got this nature from because the rest of them were a riot.

"I'm ready when you are, Father," said Timothy. "Would this have to do with the gold mine?"

The older man nodded. "Partially, but we'll discuss that on the way. Now, let us just enjoy our meal as a family, or your mother might frown down on us from where she's watching."

Everyone did precisely that, talking about subjects ranging from sport to plans for the day. Madeline decided that this was the time to tell her family she was returning to her own house by the end of the week.

When Madeline first put forth the idea of having her own house some years ago, it was immediately met with opposition from her father. He expected her to remain with them until she married, but at the age of twenty-two, Madeline had not seen that happening. Every suitor who had ever expressed an interest in her had done so on account of either

her inheritance or beauty.

Sometimes both. However, when she would speak about her interests and the like, they would talk over Madeline or inform her that as their wife, she would not need to worry about such things. That was probably the worst thing they could say to her!

As a result, she was now twenty-five and unmarried. Some relatives used the word spinster, yet when Madeline asked what they call an unmarried forty-year-old man, they would say 'bachelor.' It was all unfair, to say the least. *Mama did not mind my unmarried state. She encouraged me to marry for love and not anything else. Mama always said life was too short to have an unhappy marriage.*

"Papa, now that things are relatively back to normal, I think I should return home," said Madeline, not meeting anyone's eyes.

The table went still, but she continued to butter her muffin, carefully spreading the creamy fat on.

"I thought you were coming back to live with us," Lawrence remarked. "Now that Mama is gone, we need someone to take care of us."

"Who is going to do everything Mama did?" Bailey whined.

Madeline ignored her brothers, looking at her father's blank face. Why wasn't he saying anything? She had already made her mind up, but she at least wanted him to say something.

"When did you decide this?" he finally asked.

"I've been thinking about it for some days now," Madeline confessed. "I've neglected my own household for far too long. Not that I haven't enjoyed being here with all of you," she quickly added. "I just have my own life to live and responsibilities to see to."

Namely returning to her writing and seeing to her animals. Her family had no idea that Madeline was a writer and had written several women's fiction books under the name AS Rossouw, and published a few reports against slavery in the south. If people were to discover that AS Rossouw was indeed Madeline Spencer, it might impact her father's business. *That would be far too scandalous for our kind.*

"Why not move back home?" Timothy asked. "That way, you would have fewer responsibilities and be here where you're needed most. It's been great having you back, Maddy."

Her brothers were trying to make her feel guilty, but Madeline would not give in to their pleas.

"It's been wonderful being home with everyone, but I've got my own life to live now. You understand that, right, Papa?"

The Spencer patriarch sighed, sitting back in his seat. "I must admit that I hoped you would stay, but it wouldn't be fair to keep you from living your own life. When do you plan to leave?"

“But, Papa-!” Bailey protested.

Their father held his hand up, silencing the boy. “Hush, Bailey. Your sister is old enough to make her own decisions without interference from any of you.”

Everyone grew quiet and resumed eating, but Madeline's brothers kept shooting her pleading looks. If it were up to them, she would never leave the house, but that wouldn't be fair on her.

"Perhaps you can sort out your mother's belongings before you go," her father suggested. "See if there is anything you would like before they're put away in the attic. I've moved everything to her private parlour."

Madeline had put off doing that very thing as it seemed so final. Although they all knew their mother wasn't coming back, sorting through her belongings seemed to be closing a chapter they wanted very much to stay open. However, Madeline knew it was necessary.

“I'll do it after breakfast,” she promised.

I'll probably have to bring all my handkerchiefs to mop up my tears.

Madeline handed her abigail another scarf, amused by how many her mother had owned.

“How many is that now?” she asked. “There must be over twenty scarves in that trunk by now!”

“Twenty-three,” Rebecca replied.

Madeline whistled low. “Mama sure had a love of scarves. I have ten, and they serve me well. What's next?”

They had been going through her mother's personal belongings for the last two hours and had managed to clear away half of the mountain in the parlour. Madeline had set a few things aside, including two old stuffed bears she recalled from her childhood.

“We can go through these papers for a change from clothing,” Rebecca suggested.

Madeline grimaced. “I was actually hoping to avoid that entire box altogether, but we might as well get it over and done with.”

Rebecca pushed the heavy box over to Madeline, blowing out a puff of air when she was done.

“I really don't know what your mother has in this box,” Rebecca commented. “It feels like more than just papers.”

Madeline chuckled. “Or you're just not strong enough. I have told you to come walking with me in the mornings, and spend a little more time in the garden, but you absolutely refuse to.”

Rebecca was on the heavy side due to her love of sweets and hated any excessive exercise. *Perhaps I've been too soft on her, but she's one of the closest people in my life. Fiona would likely not be too impressed with her daughter's lack of hearty work.* Fiona- her mother's abigail- had passed away two years before.

She had had the thickest English accent Madeline had ever heard and had insisted on doing all things English despite living in America. Sometimes, Madeline's mother would take on that same accent, amusing Madeline. *Mama certainly was a character.*

"Let's not talk about exercise right now," Rebecca pleaded. "I'm doing enough as it is moving these boxes about. Hand me a few papers to quicken the pace."

Madeline scooped several out, plonking them in Rebecca's apron. "There. That should keep you busy for a little while."

The two women fell into companionable silence as they read each paper, setting them up in piles depending on their nature. Before long, Madeline came across a group of envelopes tied together with twine. Intrigued, she unwound them, picking up one dated 1794 with a British stamp.

"Twenty-three years ago," she mumbled. "What would my mother be doing with letters addressed to someone in England?"

The letters were addressed to The Duchess of Claverset, and yet here they were in America. Madeline found that odd to say the least. Could they have had something to do with Fiona? That was the only person Madeline personally knew had come from England.

“What do you have there?” Rebecca asked. “You appear puzzled.”

"I have a bunch of letters addressed to a woman called *The Duchess Claverset*, residing in England."

“Read the sender's address,” Rebecca suggested, her curiosity piqued. “Perhaps it'll give you a better clue.”

Madeline turned the envelope over, surprised when she saw an American address. In fact, the address belonged to her great aunt and uncle. What on earth was the connection here, and why did her mother have the letters?

"It seems these letters were sent by Aunt Clothilde and Uncle Morris, but somehow they wound up with Mama."

“Read them,” Rebecca pressed. “Perhaps you'll get more information.”

“Yes, you're quite right.”

Madeline opened the oldest letter, her brow knitting together the further down the page she went. Her great aunt and uncle spoke of their happiness at reuniting with a woman called Hyacinth, which Madeline assumed was the Duchess. *I've never met a duchess before. I suppose if she's related to Aunt Clothilde and Uncle Morris, she's related to me.* It was odd how no one had ever mentioned this relative. Had she died?

Madeline read letter after letter until the nature of them began to change and became more urgent. It seemed plans were made for the woman to escape with her daughter.

“Charlotte,” Madeline whispered. “Why does that sound so familiar?”

Eventually, Madeline got to the last letter and found herself disappointed. Surely there had to be something else to explain what the letters contained. *Perhaps I should ask Aunt Clothilde about them.*

Digging deeper into the box, Madeline fished out an old diary. It had the name 'Hyacinth Russell' on the front, further confusing Madeline. *Why would Mama have this woman's diary?* Dusting it, Madeline broke off the rusty lock and began reading. The first thing that jumped out at her was the uncanny similarities between her mother's handwriting and that of this duchess. Madeline read about the woman marrying a man twenty-two years her senior and how unhappy she was. There was a lift in spirits when the woman's child was born, but it didn't last.

“Poor woman. She clearly hated her marriage.”

“Did you say something?” Rebecca asked.

“Just talking about this woman I've come across. Hyacinth Russell. She was- or is- the Duchess of Claverset. I've never met a duchess before. I wonder if she lives right here in America, and we don't know it. The letters I've read seem to suggest it, but I've yet to meet her.”

“Have you read the entire diary?” Rebecca asked. “Maybe it'll give more information.”

Madeline nodded, flipping the pages of the diary for the next ten minutes. One particular entry stopped her cold.

Charlie and I will assume different identities on the ship. I no longer wish to be known as Hyacinth Russell or the Duchess of Claverset.

Hopefully, this will throw John off our scent. Fiona and Becca have gone ahead to the ship. Charlie and I will meet them later.

Fiona and Becca? Towards the bottom of the page, Madeline read the words:

Hyacinth Russell- Francesca Powell

Charlotte Russell- Madeline Powell

Madeline dropped the diary, her features fixed in horror. “This cannot be!”

Rebecca jumped to her feet with surprising speed and made her way over. "What has happened?"

Madeline merely shook her head, unable to say a word. What did the diary mean? *It cannot be true!* But the evidence was too significant for her to ignore.

Rebecca took the diary, reading the same entry. "Oh my," she breathed. "This explains a lot."

"What do you mean?" Madeline demanded. "What do you know about this?"

"Not much, I assure you," said Rebecca. "It's only that Mama used to speak about England a lot. She told me stories about a duchess and her daughter, who ran away from home to live in a new world. Mama said she used to work for the Duchess in England before she came to America. When I asked what became of the Duchess and her daughter, she refused to say anything. I always thought it strange. A story should have an ending, but this one never did. Sometimes, I would have dreams of being in another land, and I would see faces I've never met before. Mama would tell me to forget about the dreams, but I never could. Now I see why."

Madeline clutched her swimming head. "No, no, no, no! There *has* to be a mistake, Becca! None of this is true- it cannot be."

Rebecca shrugged, handing the diary back to her. "I don't know, Maddy. It all seems quite clear."

Madeline narrowed her eyes. "Why aren't you surprised by any of this? We have just found out that everything we have known has been a lie!"

Did Rebecca know more than she was letting on? Madeline wanted to scream, to throw something- anything! And yet Rebecca stood before her as calm as the sea on a sunny day.

“I am surprised,” the woman insisted. “But some part of me expected this. I suppose Mama was preparing me for this very moment by telling me all the stories. She would always tell me that whatever she did, she did for the betterment of all involved, that I should not grow angry. I finally understand what she meant.”

Madeline closed her eyes as she shook her head. “There has to be a mistake, Becca. There must be. What am I supposed to do about this? I do not know what I'm supposed to think! I just don't understand what's going on.”

Never did she think something like this would ever happen! Madeline lifted her hands and found them trembling. Whether it was from shock or anger, she did not know. What was she supposed to do about this life-altering information?

“Papa!” she exclaimed. “What will he say to all this? How could Mama...”

Wait a moment. The diary stated Madeline was three when she left England, that meant her father knew something about her mother's past. *Or did Mama lie to him as well?* There was only one way to find out. Madeline got to her feet and made her way to the drawing-room. Her father had arrived a little while ago and would be having a little brandy. *Good, he's going to need it.*

“Where are you going?!” said Rebecca, breathing heavily behind her

as she tried to keep up with Madeline.

“My father- I need to know if he knew about this.” Madeline stopped outside the door, turning to her abigail. “Don't come in with me, Becca. I need to be alone with him.”

Rebecca nodded. “Of course, but do not give into hysterics. Let him explain himself first.”

Madeline said nothing. She could not give a promise she didn't feel capable of giving. Instead, she turned away and knocked on the door, waiting for her father's permission to enter.

“Come in!” she heard him say.

Madeline walked in, blurting out the first thing that came to mind. “Are you my father?”

Her father frowned, laying aside the book he had been reading. “What do you mean? What sort of question is that?”

“Are you my father, or is John Russell my father? Or should I say, the Duke of Claverset?”

The man's face whitened. “How did you find out?”

“So it is true?” Madeline asked, sinking heavily into a chair. “You knew about this?”

Betrayal knocked into her like a fast-moving carriage, taking the breath out of her. Somehow, she had foolishly hoped the entire thing was just a misunderstanding, but that hope had just gone down in flames.

“You were never supposed to find out, Maddy,” her father insisted, his head hung.

“But I did, and now I’m faced with my entire life being one great lie. I can’t believe you and Mama kept this from me.” She was almost in tears.

Her father bowed his head, running his fingers through his hair. “It was for your own good, child. Your mother couldn’t risk anyone finding out you were both here. She was terrified the Duke would find her and drag you both back to England.”

“Don’t you mean my real father?” Madeline asked quietly.

Richard Spencer was not really her father, was he? Another stranger was, but she knew nothing about him.

The man winced. “That doesn’t make me any less of your father. From the moment I saw you, I adored you and never hesitated in calling you my own daughter.”

Madeline knew he was right. Her father had showered her with love, and not once had she felt 'different.' *But that doesn't make any of this right. They lied to me.* Not wanting to hear anymore, she stood up.

“I'll be in my room.”

“Maddy-” her father started.

Madeline held up her hand. “Please, I do not wish to speak about this right now.”

She needed to first come to terms with everything. Her father nodded and watched her leave the room.

In the following weeks, Madeline tried to continue with her life as best as she could, but the knowledge of living a life in England before coming to America played on her mind. Finally, when she could no longer ignore the facts of her previous life, she broke surprising news to her family over dinner.

“I'm going to England,” she announced.

Her brothers and father turned wide eyes to her, their knives and forks clattering to their plates.

“You don't mean that,” her father said weakly. “All your family is here, Maddy. I don't care about blood or anything like that, you hear? You are as much a Spencer as I am. Don't go back to the very country

your mother took you away from. You must know she did everything for your own good.”

Madeline had heard this argument time and time again, and although she was no longer angry with her mother, she still had many unanswered questions.

“I need to find out about my family in England, Papa. I will not rest until I know about my past. I promise I'll come back once I have all my answers.”

“Don't leave us, Maddy,” said Bailey. “You'll be gone for months! Maybe even years! Mama is gone, and now you...We don't want you to go. What about Lemony, Hippocrates, and Tally? They'll miss you, too.”

The boy ducked his face as his eyes watered, angrily spooning soup into his mouth.

“Oh, Bailey, it's only for a little while. I'll be back in time for Christmas- I promise. I'll take Lemony, Hippocrates, and Tally with me so you won't have to worry about them missing me.”

Madeline's heart sunk when her brother pushed his chair back and ran out of the room. She stood up to follow him, but Timothy stopped her.

“I'll handle it, Maddy.”

Madeline nodded, sinking back to her seat. Lawrence soon followed his older brother, avoiding her eyes.

“Oh, dear. They're all rather angry.”

“I don't blame them,” said her father. “There's nothing for you in England. Stay here where you belong.”

But Madeline had made up her mind. She was going to England whether they liked it or not.

Chapter 2

England

Gregory knew precisely why his mother had summoned him to the family home, and he was loathed to go. Getting off his horse, he handed the reins to a stable hand and made his way to the front door. It was opened before he could knock, revealing a bent-over man who should probably have retired by now.

“Staten,” Gregory greeted. “You’re looking particularly dapper today.”

“And I’m that fat Prince Regent,” the man barked. “Come in if that’s what you’re about.”

Gregory grinned. The family’s butler was becoming a cranky old man as the years went by, but Gregory did not mind. He would take the man’s sharp speech over the whining of women.

Entering the house, he noted the change in draping, wallpaper, and some vases. Gregory shook his head. His mother was wasting money once again despite all his firm warnings.

“My lady and your sisters are in the yellow parlour,” Staten stated. “I’ll have Mrs Potts bring a fresh pot of tea.”

“I’ll need brandy to deal with my mother and sisters,” Gregory

muttered.

Staten must have heard because he wheezed out a chuckle. "Better you than me, Lord Blithely. Do you need me to announce you?"

"No, I can do that myself. You should sit down before you fall over."

The old man raised his eyebrows. "The day I fall over is the day I hear you say 'I do'. Blithely Hall needs an heir."

"Not you too, Staten," Gregory groaned. "I need my sisters happily married before I can think about such things."

"If you think about it at all," the man grumbled. "Your grandfather would not be impressed if he knew his only grandson was unmarried at the ripe age of thirty-three. You have a duty to this family, young man. I would like to see the next generation before I close my eyes."

"At the rate, you're going, I doubt that will happen soon."

"This robust body will not last forever, Lord Blithely."

Gregory barked out laughter. He could not remember a time when Staten was robust. The man had always been wiry and slightly bent at the waist, but he was strong- Gregory would give him that.

“You've made this trip less dreary, old man,” he said, slapping the man's back. “Has Cook made any butter biscuits today? Specifically, the citrus ones?”

“I believe she hid some away when she knew you were coming. I'll have Mrs Potts arrange them on a plate for your tea. Now, head over to the women before they have us change anything else about this house.”

“Is it that bad?” Gregory asked.

“Need you ask?” the man returned.

Shaking his head, Gregory approached the parlour, hearing Henrietta's booming voice long before his hand reached the doorknob. He gave a sharp knock on the door, pulling it back when it was suddenly yanked open.

“Where is the-” Henrietta began, pausing when she saw Gregory. “Oh, it's you. 'Tis about time! I was beginning to wonder if you had decided against coming to see Mother.”

“And a hello to you as well, Henrietta. Will you let me in?”

The woman's brow wrinkled. “What else would I do? What a perfectly foolish question. Come in, dear brother. Oh, did you see Marianne come this way? I sent her to get me more cold meats, but she has yet to return. An entire five minutes have passed already!”

Gregory noted his sister had become considerably rounder in the face and belly and wondered if she was with child. *That would explain her lack of patience, not that she is a particularly patient person.*

"No, I have not seen her, but I'm confident she'll be along soon," Gregory assured. "It does take at least three minutes to get to the kitchen and back, not to mention arranging the meats to your liking."

His sister appeared to mull this over in her mind. "Yes, I gather you're right." Looking him up and down, Henrietta scowled. "Well, come inside, then! Do you mean to stand outside like some stranger, or come in?"

Most certainly with child. "Lead the way, dear sister."

Henrietta turned sharply, knocking her elbow into his lower belly. Gregory made a little noise of surprise more than pain, but his sister paid him no mind. Rubbing his abdomen, he entered the room to find his mother and youngest sister arguing over fabric swatches. Gregory wanted nothing more than to turn tail and run out, but now that Henrietta had seen him, it would be nigh impossible.

"Gregory has finally arrived, Mother," Henrietta remarked.

"I believe I get the last slice of plum pudding," said Marcia.

His sisters had obviously been betting again with him as the subject this time. The last time they betted, Henrietta had won their mother's black brooch. *They must get this vice from Mother.* Having a mother

who gambled had taught Gregory to never have a bored wife with access to the coffers. Once, his mother had lost three hundred pounds in one night. Gregory had been forced to pay it or face the consequences.

“Good day, Mother,” he said, kissing her cheek. “Marcia.”

“Oh, Gregory! You've finally joined us,” his mother said with a hint of accusation. “We have had two pots of tea while waiting for you, and poor Henrietta has been quite hungry.”

“Has Mrs Potts not provided something light with your tea?”

“A mother with a growing child cannot live on sandwiches, tiny pieces of cake, and a few slivers of cold meat,” his mother insisted.

Ah, so he was right. “You should have not waited on account of me, Mother.”

“Never mind that now,” she said. “Take a seat- we have much to discuss.”

Which meant they were going to ask Gregory to spend more money than he had agreed upon. Marcia was getting married in a few months, and his mother insisted they make the wedding one for the society pages. Already, they had surpassed their original budget, and Gregory was not willing to spend any more.

He sat in a chair closest to the door to make his escape easier when the time came. It was always best to enter a room with the exit in mind when it came to his mother and sisters.

“Tea?” Marcia asked a tad too sweetly.

“Mrs Potts should be coming along with a new one,” he said. “You know how I detest warm tea.”

“I hope she's coming with my cold meats as well,” Henrietta commented.

“Likely,” said Gregory, watching his sister stuff a sandwich into her mouth.

He was horrifyingly captivated by the way the bit of bread disappeared with hardly a decent chew before Henrietta reached for another.

“Gregory, dear,” his mother began. “Poor Marcia has had a frightful time finding the perfect seamstress for her wedding dress.”

“Is Mrs Lake not available?” he asked.

“Why, yes, but she's a run-of-the-mill type of seamstress, dear,” his mother explained. “We need someone who will create something magnificent and worthy of our Marcia.”

“Mrs Lake made Henrietta's dress. Are you trying to say she wore an ugly dress?”

At her name being said, Henrietta glanced sharply at them, her cheeks bulging with who knew what.

“What about my dress?” she asked around a mouthful of what Gregory assumed was apple.

Spits of the fruit flew out, but his sister paid it no mind. Fortunately, Gregory was far enough to avoid the spittle-drenched pieces, but Marcia was not. Some apple landed on her lap, bringing forth a whining cry.

“Henrietta!” she scolded. “Have you no decency?”

“I hardly did it with intention,” said the older sister by two minutes, rolling her eyes. “’Tis just a bit of apple. Dust it off.”

Marcia pulled her face as she flicked off the offending piece, her nose flaring as she shot her sister a heated glance. *Why could I not have had brothers?*

“Your dress was beautiful, dear,” their mother assured. “But time has come and gone, and your sister must keep up with the fashion of the day.”

"I married hardly two years ago, Mother," said Henrietta.

"Precisely my point, darling." The older woman nodded. "A lot has happened since then, and if we are to be perfectly honest, Marcia's gown must suit her beauty."

Henrietta narrowed her eyes, her lips curling. Even Gregory knew that wasn't the thing to say to a pregnant woman, let alone a woman! People had been comparing the two sisters since childhood, which was a sore point with Henrietta. Marcia had inherited their mother's pale skin, yellow hair, and green eyes, while Henrietta took after their father with her olive skin, dark hair, and eyes. Gregory had also inherited his mother's fair looks, but he would have preferred to be darker.

"Did you just call me ugly?" Henrietta demanded. "Is that what you think of me? I'll have you-"

"I have somewhere else to be," Gregory quickly interrupted. "I would appreciate if we could conclude this matter soon."

"Of course, dear," his mother said, quickly latching onto the way out of the pending argument. "As I was saying, we must find another seamstress to make Marcia's dress. Also, we were thinking about adding a few more flowers to brighten up the house."

"How many more flowers?"

"Enough," his mother said vaguely. "We haven't quite come to the

exact quantity, but we do have a rather large house so I would assume it would be plentiful.”

Which meant a lot. “Is this really needed, Mother? We all agreed on where Marcia would have her dress made, how many guests were coming, how many flowers to have, what we would serve for the wedding breakfast, and much more! Why do you insist on adding to this? It's hardly necessary.”

Gregory could not understand why his sister was having so much of a say in what would happen on her wedding day. Traditionally, the bride would pick the day, and that was it. *I suppose it's my fault for giving them so much freedom after father passed on.*

Henrietta and Marcia had been babies when their father passed away, leaving Gregory responsible for ensuring they were well taken care of. It had been a lot to ask of a young boy, but Gregory stepped into his role as the head of the house and did the best he could for his family. *If it hadn't been for the Duke, I don't know what I would have done.*

“Gregory!” his mother all but screeched. “How can you ask if this is all necessary? Of course, it is! Your sister is getting married, for goodness sakes. We must show everyone that we are worthy of respect.”

Ah, now he got it. This was about the timing of Marcia's wedding. Despite the younger twin being labelled the beauty of the family, Henrietta had been the one to get married first, and now she had a babe on the way. On the other hand, Marcia had been spurned by her suitor when he had run after the daughter of a servant and left her to deal with the scandal.

Gregory's sister had refused to go to any social gathering for an entire year, only leaving the house when Henrietta's husband introduced Marcia to his cousin. It took mere weeks before a betrothal was announced, and Marcia could once again hold her head up high in public.

"You want me to put more money into this wedding to prove a point," Gregory accused. "Isn't it enough that Marcia is getting married?"

Marcia, who had remained quiet during the exchange, spoke up. "If you do not wish me to be happy, then merely say it."

Her lower lip quivered for a moment before she turned her face and hid it behind a handkerchief.

Gregory inwardly groaned. *Oh, for heaven's sake! More theatrics? Will they never cease to use emotional blackmail against me?* Frankly, Gregory was growing tired of their antics. He stood up, straightening his necktie.

"Once you learn to behave like an adult, perhaps I'll revisit this conversation," he said, staring at Marcia.

"Oh, but Gregory!" his mother scolded. "How can you say that to your sister?"

"I can because she has resorted to emotional blackmail once again. I know my duty to this family, and I have performed my responsibilities with every thought to your needs. It seems my own mother and sister would have this family destitute and living without just to finance

your extravagant tastes. If it's not yet obvious that I do not condone such behaviour, it should be now. Good day."

Gregory left his mother and sisters while they still scrambled to say something. He felt some satisfaction at seeing them speechless, but he knew they would somehow pay him back for his scolding.

He met Mrs Potts heading to the parlour with his tea and biscuits, as well as Henrietta's cold meat.

"You're leaving?" the woman said aghast. "But I've just made your tea and brought your biscuits!"

Gregory smiled, grabbing a biscuit from the plate. "This will have to do, for now, Mrs Potts. I'm afraid I cannot stay any longer, or I might lose my mind."

The housekeeper nodded in understanding. "Yes, my lord. I imagine you would have had a hard time in there. Mr Staten informed me they were going to bombard you about Miss Marcia's wedding."

"Which is why I'm currently on my way out. I suggest you get those cold meats to Henrietta soon or she might eat my mother and sister at the rate she's going."

Mrs Potts coughed, masking a chuckle. "She is with child, my lord. It's to be expected."

“Did you eat like an African elephant when you were with child?”

“Well, no,” the housekeeper admitted. “But I did eat more to feed the growing babe. Every woman is different.”

“In that case, my sister is quite different. Good day, Mrs Potts. I hope I do not see you soon, and I mean that in the best way.”

“Noted,” the woman smiled, curtsying. “Good day, my lord.”

Gregory took another two biscuits, nodding his head at servants as he walked to the door. He found Staten standing there, his eyebrows risen high.

"Chickening out so soon, my lord?" the old man inquired.

“It's for their own good. I'm afraid I cannot stand another minute of their chatter, and find myself in need of proper companionship.”

“Ah, that would be the Duke of Claverset you're speaking about.”

"Indeed," Gregory agreed. "I wish you luck with this madhouse, and take your leave, Staten."

“Are you most certain you do not need a butler in your house, my lord?”

The butler said it in jest as Gregory knew the man would never leave Blithely Hall. The man had been here too long to concern himself with a few women with more time on their hands than they knew what to do with.

“Cranky old man’ does not suit my house, Staten.”

The butler smiled. “I suppose not. A good day to you, my lord,” the man bid, opening the door.

“And to you, Staten.”

Thankfully, the stable hand was already coming around with his horse, saving Gregory the need to walk to the back and get Midnight himself. Swinging onto his horse, Gregory looked to the windows and saw his sisters staring at him with disapproving expressions. Not bothered in the slightest, Gregory waved his hand and rode off.

Gregory found the Duke in a solemn mood when he was ushered into the older man's study.

“Your Grace,” he said, striding forward.

The Duke of Claverset looked up, smiling faintly. “Gregory. It's good to see you. How was your business trip?”

A few days ago, Gregory had made a brief visit to Scotland to speak with the farmers who supplied him with wool. It had gone well despite the ongoing friction between the two countries.

“Good, thank you. Is that brandy you're having? I could do with a glass.”

Gregory could see the man had not touched his brandy which usually pointed to one thing. *He's thinking about his wife and daughter again. If only he had moved on and married someone else.*

“You're more than welcome to help yourself,” the Duke said.

Gregory quickly poured himself a glass, sighing when he sunk into an armchair.

“Are you having a bad day?” the man asked.

“You could say so. My mother and sisters are behaving like their demanding selves, and I'm the tyrant who refuses to pander to their requests.”

“Is this about the wedding again?”

Gregory nodded. “That's all it can be until Marcia marries and becomes her husband's headache. Of course, I'll still have to deal with mother, but she's manageable without my sisters' influence.”

The Duke chuckled. "You have a lot on your plate, young man. How is the newspaper agency? I heard you're looking to expand publication."

"How does a man who hardly steps out of his house know what's going on outside these walls?"

"When you get to my age, it helps to have informants running around for you."

The Duke likely had dozens of informants in every crevice of society, even in the underworld.

"Your informants are right. I do want to expand publications into other countries, but I'm still testing the waters. The agency is doing better than I initially thought which I'm pleased about. The family business is also faring well despite the setbacks at the beginning of the year."

"Good, good. You've got a solid head for business, Gregory. I made the right decision asking you to help an old man keep his businesses going strong."

The two continued to discuss business and the world today, but Gregory could see the man's heart was not in the conversation. The anniversary of his wife and child's death was coming up, and despite twenty-two years passing since they met their ending on the high seas, the Duke continued to mourn them.

After an hour or so, Gregory felt considerably better talking to the Duke, but the man's mood had not lifted. *To this day, I'll never understand why the Duchess took her daughter and ran away.* Gregory decided to leave, realising the Duke wanted to be alone with his thoughts. As he travelled home, Gregory wondered about his eventual marriage.

I will not be foolish and fall for beauty as the Duke did. I cannot help but think that if he had chosen an older woman with less beauty, he would still have his wife and child today.

What did Gregory want in a wife? Intelligence was a must. There was no use marrying someone he couldn't have a decent conversation with. While he wasn't obsessed with physical attractiveness, it wouldn't do to marry an ugly woman.

Perhaps a plain woman with a lovely smile will do.

He didn't have any women in mind, although his mother had been hinting about Julia Sandton. Gregory felt no connection to the woman and did not think they would suit well. It wasn't about whether he loved her or not, but the woman didn't seem interested in anything beyond dinners and parties.

I want a wife with more to her than the latest fashion or food trend. Is that so hard to ask for?

It probably was.

Chapter 3

America

All Madeline had heard people talk about for the last couple of days was about her sudden decision to leave for England. Only her family knew why she was going, and they were all asked to remain silent on the matter. Having people know that her mother had married another man while still married to another would not go down well within their society. To make matters worse, Madeline's father knew about her mother's past but chose to marry her nevertheless.

“At least my mother got to experience a happier life than the one she had in England, but she has left me with so many questions.”

Why couldn't she recall anything about her former life? Granted that she had been three at the time, but surely she would have remembered something? Rebecca also claimed she didn't know much about her life before coming to America, but Madeline sometimes wondered if her abigail was telling the truth.

She was five when we left England, and thus, should have some memory of our previous lives.

Was this the reason Madeline never felt entirely at peace within herself? She had always assumed it had to do with never marrying or starting her own family, but that reason had never sat well with her.

I think once I find out about my past, I'll be able to move on and live a

fuller life.

Madeline did not know what she expected from her trip to England, but the answers to at least most of her questions would be a start.

I did hope to go quietly, but it seems my friends and family had other ideas.

They were throwing a going-away party for her today, and would likely invite a multitude of people who would continue to question her trip to England. Madeline would give them all the same answer.

Telling them my mother has strong ties to England and I wish to discover my English family tree should suffice. I have no need to say anything else.

Since she was leaving for the ship early tomorrow morning, the party was an afternoon affair that could run into the night. If that were the case, Madeline would excuse herself and set off to bed while the party continued.

I've done that several times before. Once more will be nothing.

She expected her friends any time now as they had all agreed to get dressed at her house. Tessa, Lilah, Morgan, and Elizabeth were close friends of Madeline and had voiced their displeasure at the temporary loss of their ringleader.

“They act as though I’m never coming back! I only wish to spend a

month or so in England, and possibly meet my father.”

Her father. It was still challenging to believe she was the daughter of a Duke and carried the title 'Lady'. Madeline was so caught up in thinking about the possibilities of what could take place in England that she did not hear her friends knock and enter her room until they were right atop her.

“Maddie!” they cried.

Madeline rocked on her chair, her hand going to her chest. “Oh, my! When did you get here?”

“Just now,” they said in unison.

“Although you were too far in your thoughts to hear us,” Elizabeth remarked.

“Were you thinking about staying?” Lilah asked, hopefully.

Madeline's friends held their breath as they awaited her answer, but they waited in vain if they thought she had changed her mind.

“No, I am not thinking about staying,” said Madeline. “I was just thinking about what to expect once I reach England, but I suppose I'll have all the time in the world to do so on the ship. It'll be some time before I reach English soil.”

"And here I thought we would get to keep you," Tessa complained.

Madeline chuckled. "Keep me? You make me sound like some dog, Tess."

"Oh, I didn't mean it like that, silly," the woman insisted. "Only that I wish you would leave the country hopping for some other unfortunate soul without loved ones like you. We'll all sorely miss you when you're gone, you know."

"I will of course miss everyone, as well, but I have to do this. I want to find out about my English ancestry, and the best way to do that is to go to the motherland. Have people started arriving for the party?"

Morgan nodded. "I counted at least sixty-eight people along the way. I expect more are coming."

Madeline could always count on Morgan to provide an exact amount rather than an estimated one.

"That's just over a quarter of the guests," Madeline said more to herself. "Papa made sure to invite everyone, even those I'm not particularly fond of."

One of them being Alexander Stratford. The man had been pursuing Madeline for well over a year, despite her best efforts to deter him.

"I rather hoped this would be an *actual* surprise party, but you always seem to know everything before it happens," Lilah complained. "How do you do it?"

It had been a surprise party right up until two days ago when she stumbled on her father discussing catering with Mrs Hodges. Madeline had put two and two together and realised a party was being planned on her behalf.

"Keen observation," Madeline winked. "Have you all brought your dresses with you? I think we should get ready."

The four women revealed their dresses, each one as colourful as the next. Madeline's was simpler- white silk, high-waisted gown with short sleeves, and beautiful embroidery along the bust line and hem. It accentuated her tall, slender figure without the need for further embellishments. Less was more with Madeline, but her friends often went in the opposite direction when it came to fashion.

They got ready together, each person getting help putting on their dress and arranging their hair. Elizabeth's hair took the longest as it was thicker and longer, leaving Lilah and Morgan at their wit's end when it failed to cooperate.

"I simply cannot deal with your hair, Liza!" Morgan complained. "Why must it be so challenging?"

"I cannot help it." Elizabeth shrugged. "Perhaps Maddy will have better luck with it. If she can handle her brothers, she can handle anything."

“Thanks for your vote of confidence,” said Madeline with a wry smile. “But handling unruly boys is different from dealing with unruly hair. Why don’t we spray a little water on it and use some rose oil to get it to comply? Not only will it help it stay in place, but your hair will smell lovely as well.”

Elizabeth agreed, and in twenty minutes, her hair was done, and they were ready. But was Madeline? *I hope Papa doesn't use this party to get me to stay. He seems afraid I'll never come back.* That would never happen. Madeline loved her family and would never decide to live away from them. *All I wish to do is discover the past I once had and meet my father.*

“Shall we go down?” Tessa asked.

Taking in a deep breath, Madeline nodded. “We might as well get things started.”

The five of them chatted and giggled as they went downstairs. No one would think that two were married with kids, and the other two were four years younger than the rest. Madeline was the only one that stood out like a sore thumb. *Perhaps I'll come back a changed woman who is ready to settle down. I might even find a suitor in England!* She nearly burst out laughing at the thought. From all she had heard regarding English men, they were not the sort of suitors she would be interested in. *I'll keep to American men, although I haven't had the best luck thus far.* Madeline's mother had run away from an English duke to marry an American businessman, leaving behind the prestige of being the Duchess of Claverset. *Papa made her so happy. That must mean us Powell women have a tendency for American men.* If that were the case, where was her suitor?

The party was in full swing less than an hour later. Madeline could not

believe her father had pulled off such an extravagant party at the last minute. A band was playing, champagne was flowing, and refreshments were bountiful. As she had predicted, most of the guests asked about her decision to go to England.

Some guests were not keen on anything English after the tensions between the two countries, but Madeline was not concerned about such things. She was a woman on a mission to discover her past and understand how things had gone so wrong to force her mother to flee England. Some details had been included in the diary and letters, but Madeline wished to hear from the Duke's perspective, and perhaps others who knew her mother well.

"May I have your attention please?"

Madeline groaned. Why was Alexander calling for everyone's attention? The man loved to be the centre of attention! *I suppose it means nothing that this is my party.* Rustling dresses, creaking necks, and shuffling shoes sounded as people focused their attention on him. Madeline had to admit the man was handsome, had wonderful broad shoulders, and a beautiful smile, but she also knew what lay behind those crystal blue eyes. *Alexander will never be the man for me.*

"Maddy, my dear, would you please come to the front?" he asked, holding out his hand.

Everyone looked at her in unison, ending her thoughts to escape. *Oh, bother. I hope he isn't about to make a spectacle of himself for me.*

Making her way to the front, Madeline caught her father's smiling face off to the side. *I know that smile- what is he up to? Papa only smiles like that when he knows he's about to get his way.* As soon as she reached

Alexander, Madeline whispered furiously to him.

“What on earth is the meaning of this? Why have you called me in front of everyone?”

“Patience, my love,” Alexander answered, drawing her to his side.

Madeline stiffened. “Let me go, Alexander. You have no right to be so familiar with me, especially before my family and friends.”

“That's just a mere formality, my dear,” he assured in his irritatingly smooth tone. “Give me a moment to change things.” Alexander turned to their guests, a wide grin on his face. “As you all may know, I've been pursuing our Maddy for quite some time, and she has proven to be rather stubborn.” He paused as people laughed. “A few nights ago, I lay awake in my bed rather distressed by the news that the woman I love would be leaving for England. That didn't sit well with me, so I decided to put an end to things. Or should I say beginning?”

Madeline's brow furrowed. Put an end to things? That sounded good if it meant he was finally going to stop pursuing her, but that didn't explain why Alexander had called her in front of everyone. *What does he mean to do?*

“I spoke to Mr Spencer a few days ago and received his permission to do this very thing.”

To Madeline's horror, Alexander took her hand and got down on one knee. *Oh my goodness! This cannot be happening.* And yet it was. Madeline looked around her, finding her father's pleased expression.

When on earth did Alexander approach him, and why don't I know anything about it? Her father knew she didn't care for the man but somehow, he had consented to a marriage between them.

“Madeline Spencer,” said Alexander, drawing her attention back to him. “Nothing in this world will make me happier than having you as my wife. Will you marry me and remain in America with me?”

Does he think proposing to me in front of everyone will make me change my mind about him? If that's what he believes, then he does not know me well at all. Which was why she could never marry him. Madeline pulled her hand away, prompting a gasp from their audience. Alexander looked genuinely surprised, as though he hadn't expected her to react like this. *Everyone believes he is perfect for me, but if they truly looked at the stark differences between us, they would see quite the opposite.*

“I cannot marry you, Alexander, nor will I ever marry you. It was foolish of you to make a public spectacle of us. Thank you for ruining my going away party.”

Madeline turned away and headed for the exit, thankful the guests had given her a clear path to the door. Hearing footsteps behind her, she thought it was Alexander and turned to give him a piece of her mind, but it was her father.

“Maddy! What is the meaning of all this?”

“I could ask you the same thing, Papa. How could you give your permission to Alexander? I expressly told you he is not the man for me and never will be.”

“But child, I just thought-”

“No, Papa,” she interrupted, shaking her head. “You didn't think. You wanted to keep me here and thought this was the way to do it. I am still going to England, and once I have found what I wanted, I will return home. Now, I think you should see to your guests before they feel neglected. You might as well comfort Alexander.”

Madeline left her father still standing as she left the room and climbed the stairs to her room. Was she wrong about denying Alexander? Her heart said no, but her mind wondered if she was merely fussy and did not know what she wanted. Madeline prayed this trip would give her the clarification and direction she needed for her future.

A Week Later

“Aunt Dianne, have you seen Lemony and Hippocrates?”

Madeline had looked high and low but could not find her mischievous little monkey and dog. *If Lemony has broken into someone's room again, the crew might throw him overboard.* Madeline had promised the captain to keep a firm hand on her pets, but they seemed to have a mind of their own. If she didn't find Lemony now, both the monkey and dog would be confined to the animals' quarters.

Alexander will tell me he told me so and that I should have left them at home. What did he know, anyway? He wasn't even supposed to be on this ship! The foolish man had not taken no for an answer and decided to follow her to England. However, she had better things to worry about right now, like finding her pets.

“Goodness. Where can they be?”

Fortunately Tally, her parrot, was calmly sitting on her favourite stand and watching her.

“I think Becca has taken them for a walk, dear,” said her aunt. “Or perhaps Jeremiah. I'm afraid I was rather tired when someone came in and said they would walk them.”

It wouldn't be Becca because she didn't particularly like Lemony, and Jeremiah didn't leave his cabin much after a couple women nearly fainted at the sight of him, so who could it have been? Smacking her palm in the middle of her brow, Madeline groaned as she realised who the culprit was.

Ever since stepping onto the ship a week ago, people had not ceased to talk about Madeline and her entourage. *You would think no one has ever seen a group of people come aboard with their pets.* Granted, her staff consisted of a large black man who stood head and shoulders above everyone, a chattering monkey, a dog that stood taller than most children, a parrot that spoke rather well, two magnificent horses, and three women. *Perhaps I'm so accustomed to this life that I fail to understand how surprising it must be for others.*

“Aunt Dianne, are you absolutely certain it was an adult and not a child who came to get Lemony and Hippocrates?”

Aunt Dianne scrunched up her face a little, fiddling with the throw that never seemed to leave her legs.

"I did think the voice was rather young when I heard it, but I thought perhaps my fatigue had made me hear things."

Madeline groaned. "Oh, no. I think that little boy a few cabins down has taken the animals. Hippocrates is nearly as big as him, and Lemony can be a handful. I'm confident the captain will put them in the animals' quarters after this."

Madeline dashed out of their roomy cabin without further word and went in search of the boy.

"I expressly told Kevin he could not take the animals without my company. Now, look at what he has done!"

To her relief, she found the three of them calmly sitting by a group of chairs. Although Madeline was confident they couldn't speak each other's language, they still appeared to be talking to each other.

"Kevin."

The boy stilled before whipping his head to her. "Miss Maddy! I... I can explain."

Madeline crossed her arms over her chest. "I'd like to see you try. I went out for some fresh air for all of five minutes, only to return and find my pets gone. That wasn't good of you."

"I did ask Mrs Abbot," Kevin explained. "Lemony and Hippocrates were bored in your room, and I thought they could also do with fresh air..." he trailed off.

"Do you mean you were bored?"

The boy hung his head. "Yes, I was bored." He looked up again, his eyes earnest. "I made sure they didn't bother anyone, Miss Maddy. They were really good and sat beside me the entire time."

Lemony and Hippocrates did appear calm but were not wearing their leashes. *That's a disaster waiting to happen.*

"It's time for them to go back inside, Kevin." Madeline saw the boy's face fall. "Maybe you can walk me back?" she offered.

Kevin jumped at the chance. "Let's go, Hippocrates, let's go Lemony."

The monkey crawled up the boy to his shoulders, while the dog came to stand by Madeline's side. Not for the first time, Madeline wondered if her own children would love animals as much as Kevin did. *If I have any.*

After dinner, Madeline found herself going through all her mother's letters and diaries. She had managed to find several more tucked away in her mother's drawers and had decided to bring them with her to England. Madeline learnt of her mother's childhood, the unscrupulous Uncle Edgar, a few other relatives, and most importantly, the Duke.

Could her real father be as terrible as her mother described him, or had she misunderstood him? After all, a twenty-two-year gap had separated them and likely made it difficult to understand each other. *I hope I shall find what I'm looking for and finally close this unknown chapter in my life.*

Chapter 4

England

Madeline couldn't believe she was finally here. She held Aunt Dianne's hand as they made their way off the boat, with her other hand holding onto Hippocrates' leash. Lemony sat on the dog's back while Tally perched on her shoulder, squawking at passers-by, and asking them if 'this was it.'

"Hush, Tally," Madeline commanded. "Yes, we're in England now."

"England! England! England!" the bird repeated.

"Would you like me to put you in a cage and put a throw over it?" Madeline warned.

Madeline would never do it as she hated cages. She believed that if an animal was treated well, trained, and showered with love, there was no need for cages. Of course, if anyone came to her house, she would have to put her bears and other large creatures in their enclosure to avoid them scaring her guests. Madeline had a large animal sanctuary on her estate filled with abandoned animals or those hurt by hunters. She would have been reluctant to leave them if not for her excellent staff who loved the animals as much as she did.

"Everyone is staring," Aunt Dianne commented. "Do you perhaps think they love my hat? I made sure to find out about London fashion, and had Lacey make me several hats to suit our trip."

If Englishwomen wore elaborate hats with feathers, large rosettes, and flowers sticking out of them, Madeline supposed her aunt's hat was perfect.

“While your hat is, uh, beautiful, Aunt, I do believe our onlookers are taken aback by our entourage.”

Some women were circling Jeremiah, giggling as they looked up at him. Several children gawked at the animals, only their parents' hands keeping them from coming any closer. Madeline also caught men openly admiring her, and rather than blush as she supposed they expected her to, she returned their gaze, lifting an arched eyebrow. Most of the men coloured and looked away, but the more daring continued to stare.

“I suppose they're no different from American men in this regard,” she muttered. “It's somewhat a comfort to know that men are the same halfway across the world.”

“Maddy!” a man called from behind. “Maddy!”

Madeline looked heavenward, shaking her head. How Alexander made it onto the ship at the last minute, she'll never know, but thank goodness she had managed to avoid him for most of their long journey to England.

“Walk faster, Aunt Dianne,” she ordered. “I do not wish to speak to Alexander.”

"Oh, but dear! He's so handsome and charming," Aunt Dianne protested.

"Then you marry him, for I will not."

Aunt Dianne's lips took on a cheeky grin. "I'd hook him in a heartbeat if not for my bad knees, failing eyesight, and the age gap."

"How disappointing. I hoped you would help me get rid of him. Perhaps a pretty Englishwoman might catch his attention. Better yet, if he decides to stay in England, I'll never have to see him again once we go home."

Aunt Dianne tsked. "That's not a nice thing to say. The man cannot help his love for you."

"It's not me he loves, Aunt, but the idea of me. Now, let us hurry along, and hopefully, we'll find our transport."

Aunt Clothilde and Uncle Morris had helped Madeline prepare for England, and organised her guides, accommodation, and transport for her stay. She knew she was to meet Mr and Mrs Winters and hoped they would appear soon. Although the journey over had been comfortable, Madeline had wished for land and a roomy house to stay in. Being confined in one space for months was not her cup of tea.

"Maddy!" Alexander called again.

“Dear, why not just speak to the man?” Aunt Dianne suggested. “He did follow you- that has to mean something.”

"It means he's an idiot," Madeline fumed. "He should have stayed in America, where he belongs."

Madeline and her aunt finally reached where Jeremiah and Rebecca stood with their mountain of luggage, and the gathering crowd. Her horses would be housed on an off-site stable until she could organise to bring them to her accommodation.

“Do you know where our guides are?” Madeline asked. “They said they would be here with three carriages to transport everyone and our luggage.”

Jeremiah would sit with the animals and some luggage as he had the most calming effect on them, Becca would ride with the rest of the luggage in another carriage, and Madeline and Aunt Dianne would travel with their guides.

“No, Miss Maddy,” Jeremiah answered. “I’ve already looked about for them.”

“That's disappointing. I hoped to leave the docks immediately and head for our temporary home.”

“Maddy!”

“Oh, heaven help me!” Madeline growled. “Why won't this man leave me alone?”

Aunt Dianne looked behind her. “I suggest you get rid of that murderous look because he's coming your way.”

Madeline turned around, seeing a harassed Alexander making his way to her. *He swims rather well. I don't suppose I could make it look like an accident if I push him into the sea. That should give me enough time to get away.* However, they were no longer close enough to the water.

“Maddy, I'm glad I caught up with you,” he said a tad breathlessly. “Did you not hear me call for you?”

“I did.”

“Then why did you not stop? Oh, I suppose you couldn't what with everyone walking about and the animals making a nuisance of themselves.”

The only one making a nuisance of himself was Alexander, but of course, he likely wouldn't see it that way.

“Have you located your guide?” she asked. “I'm confident you're in a hurry to get settled in.”

And leave her alone. Madeline didn't need the added stress of dealing with Alexander when she had so much searching to do. The first thing on her mind was finding her father. Would he believe she was his long-lost daughter?

"I don't think they're here yet," said Alexander. "Although I was assured Mr Winters would be here the minute I got off the ship."

"Mr Winters?" Madeline repeated. "Mr Aiden Winters?"

"The very same. Do you know him?"

Madeline had hardly stepped foot on English soil, and already things were going wrong. How had Alexander managed to secure the same guide? *His accommodation had best not be anywhere near mine, or I'll demand a transfer.*

"Yes. Mr Winters and his wife are our guides."

"What a wonderful surprise," exclaimed Alexander. "This must be fate telling us we should be together."

"Or a carefully thought-out plan of people meddling in my life," Madeline returned.

"You don't believe I planned this, do you?" Alexander asked. "It's a mere coincidence."

Alexander was a good liar, so there was no immediate way to deduce if he was telling the truth.

“That's neither here nor there, right now. I only wish to get out of this place and settle into our house. Jeremiah, would you please do a second sweep of the area? Mr and Mrs Winters must be here somewhere. Don't go too far.”

Madeline wasn't sure how the English would treat a black man roaming about their docks. Jeremiah had been the family slave until she convinced her father of the inhumaneness of slavery, and asked him to release all of them. Jeremiah had refused to leave and chose to remain by her side. Fortunately, he didn't have to go anywhere because a couple came towards them, their eyes wide with surprise as they took in the scene before them. The man and woman drew up to Madeline, giving Jeremiah a wary look before smiling at her.

“Miss Spencer?” the man asked.

Madeline nodded. “Guilty as charged. And you would be Mr and Mrs Winters?”

“Yes,” the woman agreed. “But do call us Aiden and Camilla.”

"Let me return the favour. You may call me Madeline or Maddy for short. This is Aunt Dianne; Rebecca, my abigail; Jeremiah, my manservant; Tally, Hippocrates, and Lemony. I have two horses, but they're being kept in a stable for now."

"You certainly have made an entrance," Camilla remarked. "We've brought four carriages as we're waiting for one more passenger to join us."

"That would be me," said Alexander. "Alexander Stratford, at your service."

"Oh, yes, Mr Stratford," Aiden greeted. "We've organised a separate carriage for you that will take you straight to your house. I'll accompany you while my wife accompanies Miss Maddy to hers."

Alexander looked disappointed. "Are we not riding together?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr Stratford. Your house is on the other side of town, and at least an hour to Miss Maddy's. Why don't we get going? I'm sure you would all like to refresh and familiarise yourselves with your accommodations. Shall we, Mr Stratford?"

Madeline could have laughed as a disappointed Alexander followed Aiden to their carriage, soon disappearing from sight.

"Why don't we head to our carriages?" Camilla suggested.

"I am more than ready," Madeline replied.

Madeline found her guide to be quite the chatterbox as their carriage rambled through the streets of London.

"As per your request, I've organised several servants to help you run the house during your stay. It is a rather large one with ample land for the animals. However, if you find you need more servants, let me know, and I'll hire more."

"I'm certain you've hired the right amount," Madeline assured. "I'm not fussy at all, and rather enjoy a bit of work here and there."

The woman looked surprised. "Do you mean housework?"

"Yes. Is that taboo in your culture?"

"For a woman of your standing- yes," Camilla admitted. "I wouldn't make it a widely known fact that you do servant's work or people might form unsavoury opinions about you."

"Noted. Is London always this busy?"

"It is growing every year as more people are choosing to have year-round homes here, but you've arrived in the middle of the London Season, which accounts for most of the traffic you see."

London Season? Madeline had never heard of it. "What on earth is a *London Season*?"

“Well, it has to do with our Parliament, but we English love a good social gathering so it has become a tradition to host balls, concerts, dinner parties and debutante balls where our eligible young women get to parade themselves and hopefully find a suitor by the end of the Season. It's all rather fun.”

Madeline found herself rather curious about it all. “Do you think you could organise a few invitations for me? I'd love to see what it's all about.”

“I'll certainly try my best,” the woman promised. “But I do think you've made a grand enough entrance today to set tongues wagging. You might find invitations coming your way anyway.”

If being myself brings much attention, I wonder what would happen once I claim to be the Duke of Claverset's daughter?

“Maddy, may I ask what Mr Stratford is to you?” Camilla asked. “He seemed rather reluctant to leave your side.”

“He is just a man hoping I'll come to my senses and return to America to marry him.”

Camilla's eyes widened. “Oh, I see. I do not blame him- you are quite a beauty. You'll be turning heads wherever you go.”

“I don't pay too much attention to physical beauty,” said Madeline. “It's fleeting and deceitful. Unfortunately, the good Lord decided to bless me with more than my fair share of it, and now I've had to deal with unwanted suitors all vying for my hand. It's most tiresome.”

“You remind me of my cousin. He, too, is a handsome man but holds nothing by it. Perhaps you'll get on well.”

A man that wasn't concerned about beauty? That's rare. “I'm sure we will.”

“I daresay you'll meet him once we arrive at your house as you'll be renting from him.”

“Oh?” said Madeline. “What is his name?”

“Formally Lord Blithely, and Gregory for all other times.”

“That's a good, strong name,” said Aunt Dianne.

The two younger women looked at her in surprise. Aunt Dianne had been sleeping mere moments before, her soft snores filling the carriage's interior.

“I didn't realise you were awake, Aunt,” Madeline mused. “You've been listening to our conversation.”

“I only caught the end,” the woman admitted. “This Gregory sounds like a good match for you, dear.”

"Oh, no, Aunt," Madeline groaned. "Do not start. I thought you liked Alexander or has that changed?"

The older woman shrugged. "It's good to keep one's options open."

Camilla was the first to giggle before all three of them fell into laughter. Although she didn't say so, Madeline was interested to know more about Gregory. He sounded different from the rest; meeting him in person would allow her to find out about his character.

Madeline received her opportunity immediately after they arrived at her new home. A tall man with pale blond hair and slender frame came towards them, his stride wide and sure. *He clearly has confidence, but that could also mean cockiness.* Madeline didn't miss just how handsome her landlord was, but she was used to meeting good-looking people.

"Miss Spencer, a pleasure to meet you," he said. "I'm sure my cousin has explained everything to you."

Polite and to the point. I can't decide if that's a good trait, yet. "Lord Blithely, thank you for hiring your house to us. It looks spacious and will suit our needs well."

"I believe so," he agreed. "Would you like a tour?"

"Yes, please, but I must let my animals out first. The poor dears have been cooped up in the carriage for quite some time. Fortunately,

Jeremiah is with them- he's wonderful with animals.”

Madeline did not wait for Gregory to speak as she went to the last carriage and knocked.

“Jeremiah, you can come out with my darlings. I'm sure you all need to stretch your legs.”

The door opened, and Jeremiah stepped out with Tally on one shoulder, and Lemony under his arm. Hippocrates followed behind him, stretching as his paws hit the ground.

“Go on ahead while I wake up Rebecca. Carriage rides always put her to sleep! Lord Blithely has offered to give us a tour, which I feel she should be a part of.”

“Yes, Miss Maddy,” said Jeremiah. “Maybe I should take the animals to relieve themselves first. Is there a way to the land behind the house?”

“Ask Lord Blithely- the man with the pale-yellow hair. He'll direct you, I'm sure.”

Jeremiah moved along, speaking to the animals about good behaviour while they were in England. Madeline smiled. “I sometimes wonder if he has some mystical abilities to communicate with animals. They always seem to listen to him.”

After waking up a grumpy Rebecca, Madeline returned to her landlord who appeared a little less refined than he had moments ago.

“I wasn't aware you were bringing animals, Miss Spencer,” he said stiffly. “I must warn you that I'm most particular about the house remaining in one piece.”

“I'm sure I mentioned something to Mrs Winters,” she said more to herself. Madeline had been so busy with preparations that it may have slipped her mind. “You needn't worry, Lord Blithely, I assure you. My animals are all angels.”

The man did not entirely believe her but he moved ahead with the tour, eventually leaving them with an invitation to his family home for dinner at his mother's request. Madeline graciously accepted the invitation and promised to return it soon. Lord Blithely didn't seem too excited by the prospect. *It must be the animals.* By the time he left, Madeline had concluded that her landlord was uptight and stuffy, but extremely handsome. He was most decidedly not her cup of tea.

Madeline found the Montgomery family to be an odd bunch. What was most apparent was Gregory was nothing like them, and indeed, he seemed out of place. Lady Blithely seemed interested in Madeline's life and asked dozens of questions. Madeline was all too happy to answer them as she was eager to make a good impression. It would be no good to earn a terrible reputation right off the bat.

“Your life sounds quite colourful, Miss Spencer,” Lady Blithely commented. “What on earth brought you to dreary England?”

“Oh, I would not call this country dreary, my lady. It has its own charm, and I'm told the countryside is stunning.”

The viscountess smiled. "Oh, well, we do have our good points. Do you have family here?"

"I do indeed, but I'm not familiar with them, which is why I've come to search for them. We were separated some years ago when my mother left England and travelled to America."

Madeline didn't want to give more information in case it interfered with her plans to find her father.

"Oh, so were you born here?" Marcia asked.

"I was and spent the first three years of my life here. Unfortunately, I don't remember any of it."

"I find it strange your mother did not tell you about your family here, Miss Spencer," Gregory remarked. "Was she running away from something, perhaps?"

Madeline found it strange that Gregory could have so little information yet hit the nail on the head. *He must be intelligent.*

"What a thing to say, Gregory!" his mother scolded. "Why would Miss Spencer's mother run away from her home?"

Gregory shrugged. "I was only giving my opinion."

“Which you have a right to,” Madeline quickly added. “Camilla informed me of the London Season. I'm rather curious about it.”

“As you should be!” said Lady Blithely. “It lasts about four months, and everyone who is anyone attends it.”

The viscountess continued to speak about the Season, explaining the social etiquette expected (as she assumed American etiquette was miles different from the English), all the important people to look out for, and never committing a faux pas by wearing a last season gown. Madeline listened with half an ear as she was too busy observing her landlord. The man was not friendly at all and seemed to dislike her. Madeline was not used to this. *I wish to ruffle his feathers just to see what reaction I'll get out of him, but that might backfire in my face.*

It did not occur to her until later that night that Gregory had captured her interest- a first for any man. *Strange indeed.*

Chapter 5

His tenant must have laughed at least a dozen times in the last five minutes. Gregory sipped his wine, his eyes travelling to the flamboyant American woman. How could anyone be this cheerful and loud without showing signs of flagging? He couldn't understand it.

“Gregory told us of your pets, Miss Spencer,” said Marcia. “What on earth possessed you to have a monkey as a pet?”

The question sounded impertinent to Gregory's ears, but Madeline showed no displeasure.

“It's more common than you think,” the woman answered.

“Perhaps for a pirate,” Gregory muttered.

“Do you know any pirates, Lord Blithely?”

Gregory coughed a little as his wine went down the wrong way. The woman had heard him! *I'm quite certain I spoke under my voice.*

“No, I'm afraid I do not, Miss Spencer.”

“Oh, I assumed you knew of pirates with pet monkeys. You sounded

as though you did, or is that merely a stereotype? I also own a parrot, and that is typically a pirate thing to do, isn't it?"

Gregory felt bombarded by the woman's questions. *This has never happened before. I'm floundering for an answer all because of a woman.* Perhaps he should take back his thought of finding an intelligent woman for a wife. *Not that I'm considering this woman. She's far too forward for my liking.*

"You can have whatever pet you desire, Miss Spencer," he finally said.

"That's an excellent answer, my lord. Most men would say that a cat or small dog are appropriate pets for a woman, but I find that incorrect. I have a pet sanctuary on my estate."

"You own your own estate?" Marcia interrupted.

"Why, yes, I do," Madeline responded. "I bought it several years ago when I decided to set up my own house. I quite prefer my independence, you see, and it has allowed me to do so much more. The pet sanctuary, or rather I should call it an animal *sanctuary* as not every animal is my pet, was an idea that came to me two springs ago. I have several bears, a few wolves, some foxes, deer, squirrels, raccoons, beavers, and a whole host of others that I cannot think of right now."

Bears? Wolves? Beavers? What kind of woman was this? Was she a woman? Gregory peered a little more closely at Madeline, quickly coming to the conclusion that she was undoubtedly all woman and a lovely one at that. *She reminds me of someone, but I cannot recall who at this moment.*

“Aren't you terrified at all, Miss Spencer?” asked his horrified mother. “Most of those animals are wild and dangerous. Why not something fluffy like rabbits or even chickens?”

“Oh, I have those as well, Lady Blithely, but obviously in a different area than the more dangerous creatures. We wouldn't want the wolves eating the rabbits, would we?”

Gregory could see his mother and sister were speechless. *I find myself not having the words to speak, so I'm no better.* Madeline Spencer looked like an Englishwoman with her rosy complexion, dainty hands and feet, slender form, and sweet voice, but that was as far as it went. *American women must be an entirely different breed. She would put some of our men to shame!*

“Have I said the wrong thing?” Madeline inquired. “You all seem rather quiet, or are you enjoying the meal? I must say this mutton is delicious. I prefer beef or lamb from our farms, but I wouldn't mind having this mutton every now and then back home. It appears to be braised in a thick sauce with apples- am I right? I imagine it was baked in the oven from the texture of it, but since mutton takes a day and an age to soften, the cook must have used a salt dough crust first to seal all the moisture inside, and then a shortcrust pastry for the top or else the pastry would have burnt beyond recognition.”

Madeline spoke as if she knew her way around the kitchen, which didn't make sense. Camilla told him the woman was wealthy, and her family was more affluent with gold mines and various businesses. How was it that a socialite came to know so much about cooking?

“Do American women cook?” Gregory found himself asking.

"Well, it depends on your social class, doesn't it?" she said. "It would be the same here in England. If you're from the upper class, then I don't imagine you would need to cook as you would get someone else to do it. The lower classes or the average American woman does cook to feed her family. Mealtimes are rather important, and a lot of effort is put into it."

"What I mean is," he corrected. "Do you cook?"

"What a question, Gregory!" said his mother with a hint of outrage. "Why would Miss Spencer cook?"

"But I do, my lady," Madeline insisted. "And I rather enjoy it. At my family home, I tend to help Cook whenever I'm available, but I find I'm too busy to bother at my own house. Odd, isn't it? I like to know what goes into my meals and took up the hobby when Mama invited me to hand out food to the poor. I wanted to know if the needy were getting the proper nutrients they needed to survive, so I began to ask about food and cooking methods. I have a large vegetable garden and orchard where most of the harvest goes to the needy, and the rest we consume. Once a day, depending on the season, we make soup, bread, cakes, and the like to hand out. It warms my heart when I see a happy child."

When Madeline smiled, Gregory could have sworn he heard angels on high singing. Shaking his head, he bent his head and continued to eat.

"You're too kind, Miss Spencer," his mother said somewhat uncertainly. "It seems you go above and beyond for the less fortunate."

Gregory could tell his mother was taken aback by Madeline's odd ways.

“May I ask how old you are, Miss Spencer?” Marcia asked. “You hardly seem older than I am, and yet you've accomplished so much.”

“Dear, it's rude to ask a woman's age,” his mother scolded.

“I don't mind telling her, my lady. I turned twenty-five several weeks ago.”

Gregory heard crickets at the table. The woman was undoubtedly a spinster yet seemed happy about it.

“Do you perhaps have a beau at home?” his mother questioned. “A beautiful woman as yourself is surely never short of suitors.”

Madeline shook her head. “No, I do not have any such person in my life, my lady. I find the men of today altogether superficial. It's getting harder to find a man of worth. I have no need for a husband's name, fortune, or protection, so what you have left is personality.”

“Personality?” the older woman asked weakly. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“A lot, my lady. I can hardly marry a bore, can I? A man must have more to recommend him than his physical appearance, title, wealth,

and influence. My mother was most insistent about marrying for love and companionship more than anything else. She married my father and was happy, so I would deduce that she gave me sound advice."

Gregory felt as though Madeline was talking about him, but she hadn't looked his way once. *That doesn't mean she isn't describing me. I believe I have much to offer a woman, but I have nothing according to this woman's words.*

"Do you believe you have much to offer a man, Miss Spencer?"

The words were out of Gregory's mouth before he could think better of the question. Madeline turned to him, cocking her head to the side.

"I believe I do, my lord. Setting aside my wealth and physical attributes, my husband would never live a dull moment in his life. My life is full of, well, life, which is important. Yes, there will be responsibilities and such, but I do not think it will negatively affect our marriage. Granted, I marry the right type of man. I hardly believe I'm every man's cup of tea."

The woman's answer intrigued Gregory more than he wanted to admit. "You have a high opinion of yourself."

His mother and sister gasped, but Madeline laughed. "It helps to know what you bring to the table, my lord."

They were interrupted by a servant announcing the next course, and as Gregory watched how Madeline interacted with the staff, he wondered if she was all she said she was. He couldn't detect any deceit

in her and found her openness begrudgingly refreshing.

She clearly does not know her place in society. She is a woman and should act accordingly, but she evidently believes the rules do not apply to her. Women who took up their own residence, had their own wealth, made significant decisions without consulting a male member of her family, and believed a husband more of an accessory than a necessity was undoubtedly misled. She didn't say she believes a husband is an accessory, but she might as well have.

"I understand that you have a black servant with you, Miss Spencer," his mother asked after some time. "Don't you find them rather..."

"Savage? Backward? Illiterate? Children of Belial?" Madeline offered.

"Well, yes," his mother agreed, smiling. "That's it."

"Not at all. That's a misconception given by Europeans who think themselves far superior to any other race. I believe that's nonsensical and inaccurate. Jeremiah can speak four languages, is one of the gentlest men I've ever known, and has never spoken or behaved intolerably."

"But that's to be expected," the viscountess argued. "You own him; thus, he cannot misbehave."

"I do not own him, my lady. Jeremiah received his freedom over ten years ago, along with all the family's slaves. He refused to leave my side, so he now earns wages. I'll have you know that most of his wages are given away to poor European families in our community. Of

course, he tries to help his fellow man still in bondage in the South, but I'm afraid it will take a lot of convincing before slavery is abolished in America."

"I take it you're against slavery, Miss Spencer?" Gregory asked.

"With every fibre of my being, my lord," the woman said with conviction. "No human should be treated worse than an animal, no matter how different they are to us."

Having this opinion would likely cause trouble with colonists, but Gregory respected her for it. His mother and sister, on the other hand, seemed increasingly horrified.

"Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, Miss Spencer," he said, paving the way for a new topic. "I'm sure you have other stories to share with us. Your life seems to be one great adventure."

Madeline frowned. "I've never thought of it that way, but I suppose you're right. I have landed myself in various scrapes over the years, but my charm always seems to get me out again!"

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is fleeting. The words immediately entered Gregory's mind, but he didn't think the saying applied to Madeline. Yes, she was beautiful and charming, but it didn't seem forced or put on; it was natural. *If I think any more good thoughts about her, I might lose sight of how annoying I find her.*

"I'm not keen on hunting, but I once lost a bet to my brothers and had to catch the turkey for our Thanksgiving dinner," Gregory heard her

saying.

“You actually hunted for the turkey?” said Marcia.

"Not precisely. I laid a trap for it and apologised when I killed it. It was the last turkey I ever ate. There is something about looking an animal in the eyes and taking its life that didn't sit well with me. Of course, I sound hypocritical since I still eat meat, but I did give it up for several years."

Marcia was wide-eyed as she ate up the story. “When did you start eating meat again?”

“When my brothers tricked me once again. What I thought was vegetable pie turned out to be meat and vegetable pie. I was livid about it, but it started my craving for meat once again, and here I am. I must admit that I hate myself a little whenever I eat animal flesh, and I'm considering going back to vegetables and fruits. Possibly butter, cheese, milk, cream- would you consider eating an unfertilised egg as *flesh*?”

Madeline seemed to pose the question to him. “Well, uh, I've never thought about it. No?” he stammered.

She shrugged. “I suppose I'll have to think carefully about it. Cook will likely give me an ear-twisting if I refuse her meals and ask for vegetables instead. She wasn't at all impressed when I stopped eating it.”

Madeline continued to speak about her family traditions and amusing

stories, keeping his mother and sister riveted. *I believe, without a shadow of a doubt, that she commands attention wherever she goes. She has Mother and Marcia eating out of the palm of her hand!* Gregory's mother was judgemental when it came to people without titles, but Madeline's flamboyancy, charm, beauty, and wealth seemed to make up for that.

Miss Spencer's name will be all over town come tomorrow afternoon. Gregory's mother was a terrible gossip, and the trait had passed on to his sisters as well. *I have never been interested in the sort of woman who becomes the life of the party wherever she goes, but I cannot help but watch her. Perhaps the novelty of meeting a woman like Miss Spencer will fade, and I'll be left with my irritation.* Somehow, Gregory doubted that.

To his surprise, Madeline pulled out a pocket watch from her reticule and frowned at the time.

“Oh! I didn't realise it was that late.”

“Do you have somewhere else to be, Miss Spencer?” his mother inquired.

“It's just that my babies prefer me to put them to bed, my lady,” Madeline explained. “And if I'm not there, they tend to wreak havoc. I would hate for the other servants to be frightened by their antics. Not even Jeremiah can handle them when they become hysterical.”

“Babies?” his mother asked, confused.

“My pets- Hippocrates, Tally, and Lemony. Dasher and Prancer have

yet to arrive from where they're currently housed."

Good Lord! The woman referred to her pets as babies! *Now, I've heard it all.* Gregory's mother and sister appeared to be at a loss of what to say.

"Why don't I escort you out, Miss Spencer?" he offered.

The thought of her animals tearing through the house filled him with dread. *I still intend to give Camilla an earful concerning those animals. She never mentioned anything of the sort!*

"Oh, would you? How kind of you, my lord." Turning to the women, Madeline offered them a bright smile. "This has been an absolute pleasure. My father was worried the English would not be as warm and inviting as their American counterparts, but I can gladly tell him he was wrong. I do hope to see you again."

Gregory helped Madeline out of her chair as his mother and sister said their goodbyes, asking her to call again. *I bloody well hope not! One dinner was more than enough, thank you very much.*

Escorting her outside, Gregory found he had nothing to say. *I can at least wish her a safe trip to the house!*

"Miss Spencer-"

"Lord Blithely," she said at the same time, laughing. "Oh, you first."

“No, ladies first.”

"In that case, I wish to thank you once again for allowing my staff and I into your house and giving me a warm welcome into your home. I've had a good first day in England."

"I have no doubt my mother and sister have enjoyed themselves immensely."

Gregory carefully left himself out of the equation, not wanting to give her any ideas.

"I have enjoyed myself, as well."

Her carriage came around, and she immediately stepped up but appeared to step on her dress. The misstep launched her backwards into Gregory's arms, catching them both by surprise. Madeline's face was mere inches from his, giving him a close-up of her flawless skin, vivid grey eyes, pink rosebud mouth, and pert little nose. Madeline was lovely from afar, but she was stunning up close. A neighing horse brought Gregory out of whatever moment he had just experienced, reminding him of where he was. He cleared his throat, putting Madeline away from him.

“You need to be more careful!” he scolded. “You might have fallen and bumped your head.”

"Then, I am most glad you were here to catch me."

Was it his hearing, or did her voice sound a little breathy? *Perhaps she received a fright from her near fall.*

"I won't always be around, Miss Spencer. Good night."

Gregory turned away, quickly walking to the front door. Once there, he paused and looked behind him once, seeing Madeline watching him from her carriage door window. She had a perplexed look on her face as though she were trying to figure him out. The feeling was mutual.

Chapter 6

Madeline believed it would take some time before she felt comfortable in her temporary home, but surprisingly everyone- including the animals- had settled in nicely within the week. It was just as well as she had begun to receive countless invitations the day after her dinner with the Montgomery family. *Lady Blithely must have done a great job of telling everyone about me. I've had nothing but questions since I started receiving people in my house.*

Today, three women had come to see her (*without an invite, I might add*), and had not ceased to ask her questions about her life. Madeline could feel a headache coming on, but she knew she had to put up with the women lest they badmouth her.

“Miss Spencer, I must say that we have been curious to know about the American woman who has caused such a wave of interest amongst the people of London,” Mrs Dudley remarked. “I told my daughters that we simply must come and see and welcome you, although I suspect Lady Blithely did a wonderful job of it the other night.”

“I'm honoured that you would give any thought to me, Mrs Dudley. Everyone has been so friendly and gracious. It humbles me.”

That seemed to please the woman. She fixed her glasses perched on the bridge of her nose, smiling at her daughters.

“Do you see, girls? Miss Spencer is positively delightful. You should never judge a person until you meet them yourself.”

Miss Dudley scrunched up her face, her expression defiant. "But, Mama, you were the one who-

"Hush, Natalie," her mother urged. "Drink your tea, please."

Madeline was curious as to what the woman was about to say. It clearly wasn't something nice, or Mrs Dudley would have never silenced her daughter. *They probably had preconceived ideas about what an American woman is like.*

"Would you and your daughters like anything else, Mrs Dudley? Mrs Winters has found me the most wonderful cook who has baked a storm of sweet treats this morning. Or would you prefer something savoury?"

Madeline had noticed how quickly the women had gone through the refreshments Rebecca had set out for them twenty minutes ago. *It's either they're hungry or enjoying the food.*

"Oh, we couldn't ask that of you," Mrs Dudley said half-heartedly.

"It would be no problem at all," Madeline insisted. "I can have Becca bring another plate of sandwiches and biscuits. Perhaps you'd like to take a few home? I have more than enough."

"Well, if you insist..."

“I do.”

"Then we'd be happy to have a little more to enjoy with our tea, Miss Spencer." The woman grinned. "It's not often we have such generous people as yourself. However, it must cost a fortune renting this large house and keeping up with all the visitors."

Madeline could tell Mrs Dudley was fishing for information on her financial status. *If I had been a man, I would have been worried.* Both her daughters were unmarried, with Miss Dudley entering her first Season this year. Miss Candace was still too young at fifteen, but Madeline had a feeling her mother would accelerate her 'coming out.'

“I am a woman of comfortable means, and I'm fortunate enough to be able to afford this house and a great many other things.”

“So it's true that you're wealthy?” Miss Candace blurted.

Mrs Dudley sucked in her breath, giving her daughter a steely look. Madeline wanted to laugh. It was perfectly acceptable for the older woman to beat about the bush, but it was wrong for her daughter to be upfront.

“I do not mind the question, Mrs Dudley, I assure you.” Madeline smiled. “I suppose you could say that I'm wealthy, although my father should bear that title. He has worked hard to provide for our family.”

Mrs Dudley looked ready to drool. “You said you had brothers, am I right?”

“Yes, three.”

“And how old are they?”

Ah, Madeline saw where the woman was going with this. "Timothy is eighteen and will turn nineteen in the fall. Lawrence is thirteen, and little Bailey is seven, although he hates me calling him 'little'.

“Fall?” Miss Dudley asked.

“Autumn,” Madeline explained.

“Is Timothy betrothed to anyone at the moment?” Mrs Dudley inquired.

Timothy wouldn't like to know that a mother had eyes on him for her daughter. Miss Dudley was not Timothy's type of girl. In fact, Madeline had the sneaky suspicion her brother had fallen in love with Lilah, who was two years his senior.

“Not officially, but he has desires to court a woman.”

Madeline wasn't really lying. She was simply speaking about future events to come. *I'm almost certain Timothy will approach Lilah.*

Mrs Dudley was visibly disappointed. "Oh, I see. Do you think it a done deal?"

"Absolutely. More tea?"

Madeline refilled their cups and pulled on the rope in the parlour, summoning her handmaiden. After giving Rebecca instructions to bring more eats, she settled with a fresh cup of tea and wondered what else the women would ask her.

"Some say you're running away from something or someone," Mrs Dudley began. "But I don't believe a word of it. What is wrong with a woman travelling halfway across the world on a whim?"

Why do the English insist on asking questions without actually asking them?
Madeline was finding this custom increasingly tiring.

"It wasn't on a whim, Mrs Dudley. I decided to trace my English heritage and believed the best way to do it was to come to England. I wouldn't drag my aunt, servants, and pets for something unimportant."

"Precisely my point," said Mrs Dudley. "This is exactly what I told them. Where is your aunt?"

"Taking a rest. She's still getting used to the English life."

Aunt Dianne had gone shopping the day before, buying up whatever

she saw. The shopkeepers would have been excited to meet a woman who didn't haggle over prices or demand extra attention. Madeline's aunt had only come home late afternoon and had promptly gone to bed complaining about a headache. The woman was much improved this morning but refused to see anyone. *I suppose that's what you get when you shop 'til you drop.*

"Completely understandable," Mrs Dudley agreed. "Us older women can get tired much quicker than before. We must look after ourselves."

The three women started discussing the London Season, hardly aware that Madeline was not saying much. It suited her fine as she preferred to observe than to be the one doing all the talking. *I can talk the ear off any person, but I find it imperative to listen more than speak. Who knows what kind of information I might find out?*

"I heard Nancy Pinkelton had to get married in a hurry," said Miss Dudley. "Some are saying she is with child."

Mrs Dudley tsked. "Girls of today have no honour and pride. Why, look at what happened to Duke Claverset? You girls were not born yet when that sad turn of events took place. So sad, such a scandal."

Madeline's ears perked up at the mention of the name. *If I'm not mistaken, they are talking about my birth father.*

"What happened, Mama?" Miss Candace asked. "I do not think I've heard this story before."

"Indeed?" Mrs Dudley seemed surprised. "Have I never mentioned it?"

Both her daughters shook their heads. What did the older woman know about the story? Would there be any truth to it?

“Well, I remember it like it was just yesterday,” Mrs Dudley claimed. “But it was over twenty years ago.”

“Twenty years?” Miss Dudley exclaimed. “That's far too long ago to be of any importance today.”

“That's what you think, Natalie, and you would be wrong. Duke Claverset is not only wealthier than most people alive, but he is also influential. Having his wife run away from him reduced him to a man who hardly leaves his house.”

Miss Candace gasped. “His wife ran away from him? Was he that ugly-looking?”

“Not in the slightest. The Duke has always been handsome, but I must admit I do not know what he looks like now. Hardly anyone sees him now.”

“Why did his wife run away?” Madeline asked.

The older woman shrugged. “No one has the exact answer. Some say he was a possessive husband who controlled her within an inch of her life, and others say she was a spoilt woman who didn't want the rule of her husband over her head. Some also say the spirit of his first wife

haunted the Duke's marriage and drove his wife and daughter away.”

Madeline had heard about the Duke's possessiveness, but not about the spoilt part or the ghost.

“They had a daughter together?” inquired Miss Dudley.

“Yes- Charlotte, I believe. She was the apple of her father's eye, and it killed him to find out they had perished at sea.”

That stunned Madeline. “He believes his wife and daughter are dead?”

Mrs Dudley nodded sadly. "He doesn't just believe it, he knows it. He hired men to go looking for them and found out they had boarded a ship to America. Unfortunately, the ship never made it."

Madeline had never considered the Duke would believe her dead. *If I go to him and claim to be his daughter, he might just have a heart attack!*

“That is terrible,” Miss Candace remarked.

“You can say that again, dear,” Mrs Dudley agreed. “Not only did he lose his first wife and unborn babe, but his second wife and daughter as well. He must be cursed.”

Mama's diary never mentioned another wife and child. I do not know the

Duke, but I feel sorry for him. Perhaps it will be a good thing to meet him and reveal the truth to him. I don't know how that will help, but I don't want him to die believing a lie. Madeline decided to write a brief note to her father this afternoon and set the ball rolling for their first meeting in twenty-two years.

Madeline was having breakfast the next morning when a footman delivered a letter to her. She immediately noted it was from the Duke.

“Already?! I only sent my note to him yesterday!”

Perhaps what she had written in the letter had prompted the Duke to send a quick response. Madeline had claimed to know something about his wife and daughter who perished at sea, knowing it would be the bait she needed to lure the Duke.

“Becca!” she yelled.

Rebecca came running in moments later, wiping her wet hands on her apron. “What is it? Has something happened?”

Madeline handed the letter to her. “The Duke has agreed to see me.”

“Indeed?” said Rebecca, reading the letter. “It says by twelve noon tomorrow. This is rather quick, yes? What do you think?”

“That I'm going to meet my birth father. I want to understand what was going through Mama's mind when she left him.”

“What if he doesn't believe you?”

Rebecca's question was a valid one. Madeline had thought about that, but she wanted to believe that a father would recognise his child no matter how much time had passed. *If he loved me as much as people said he did, then there should not be any problem.*

Madeline was off to the Duke's estate the next day with Aunt Dianne. She hoped the woman would be the support Madeline needed to face her unknown path. Aunt Dianne did not know the full details of the story, neither had Madeline informed her. *I know she's aware of the Duke, but I do not think she has realised that this is the same Duke we're about to meet.*

They were ushered into the magnificent house by the butler, but poor Aunt Dianne's bladder decided to make itself known before they reached the parlour.

“May I be directed to the water closet?” Aunt Dianne asked, her cheeks pink.

“Certainly, ma'am. Miss Spencer, if you would be so kind as to continue to the door with the green doorknob?”

So, she was to continue on alone? Madeline gulped, nodding her head. “Yes, of course. Will the Duke be there?”

“He will meet you there, Miss. Excuse me, I will be with you in just a

moment.”

The butler led an embarrassed Aunt Dianne down a hallway and out of sight, leaving Madeline alone.

“He said the door with the green doorknob. Which one is that?” She spotted it to her left. “There it is.”

Her stomach in knots, Madeline approached the door, opening it when no one answered her knock.

“Silly! He said the Duke would meet me here.”

She entered the room, at a sudden loss at which chair to sit on. A pink one with dainty flowers caught her eye. It seemed somewhat familiar to her, but she couldn't recall a specific memory. Madeline was quite disappointed she could not remember anything about the house. Perhaps the memories were buried so deeply that not even her previous home could jog her memory.

She had hardly sat down when the door opened, and an old but handsome man walked inside.

“Excuse my lateness, Miss Spencer, but I...”

The man trailed off as he stared at her. Madeline assumed this was the Duke and found herself oddly drawn to him.

“Your Grace, it's a pleasure to meet you,” she managed to say.

“Hyacinth?” the man asked, his voice trembling. “But you're dead! You can't be Hyacinth! Are you a ghost?”

The Duke was clearly distraught. Madeline was worried he might collapse from shock, so she left her seat, but the man backed away in apparent fright.

“I assure you I'm not a ghost, Your Grace, neither am I Hyacinth.”

“But you look just like her! That's not possible.”

Madeline held out her arm. “You can touch it and see that I'm as real as you are, Your Grace. I know that I look a lot like your wife, and there's a reason for it, but you must first calm down.”

The Duke allowed her to put her hands on his arm, guiding him to the nearest chair. Once he had moved on from his fright, Madeline believed it best to come out with the truth.

“I am not Hyacinth, Your Grace, but I am her daughter. Your daughter.”

The Duke's eyes watered, his hands reaching out to her. “Charlotte? My Charlotte?”

“Ye-”

Madeline jumped when the door was opened forcefully, and an angry-looking Gregory walked into the room, his eyes spitting fire at her. What on earth was Gregory doing here?

“Do not listen to a word she is saying, Your Grace! She is an imposter.”

She was an imposter? “I beg your pardon?”

Gregory ignored her, pushing past her to speak to the Duke. "Do not listen to her, Your Grace. Her name is Madeline Spencer, and she's from America. She is not your daughter- she died in that terrible storm twenty-two years ago."

How dare Gregory get between her and her father? Madeline pushed at him, planting her hands on her hips as she stared him down.

“How dare you accuse me of being an imposter? Do you have any proof of this?”

“Did you forget that you're living in my house?” Gregory spat. “You came to dinner and told us about your life in America, or was that all a lie?”

“Of course, it wasn't!” Madeline bit back. “Instead of jumping to conclusions, why don't you use your head and listen to me?”

“Ha! When pig's fly! You need to leave, Miss Spencer. I never want to see you here again. I would kick you out of my house if not for my good honour.”

Madeline was not going to let anyone tell her what to do, especially when she was in the right.

“Who are you to my father that you can order me about?”

Gregory laughed. "Your father? How pathetic. Your father is Richard Spencer, and your mother was Francesca Spencer, who died several months ago, not twenty-two years ago. Have I left anything out?"

“Who are you to my father?” Madeline repeated, gritting her teeth.

“A man who has looked up to him for most of my life! That's who I am. I was eleven years old when the Duke lost his wife and daughter in that freak storm. I saw him mourn their deaths. Not only was he my father's best friend, but the man who helped raise me after my father passed away. Do you think I'll allow an imposter like you to come here and pose as his daughter?”

No wonder Gregory was so angry. He clearly had close ties to the Duke. Aunt Dianne chose that moment to come in, frowning when she saw the heated scene before her.

“Dear, is everything all right?”

“Yes, Aunt,” Madeline assured. “Everything is just fine. Unfortunately, we have to leave right now.”

“But your meeting with the Duke-”

“Has been temporarily cancelled.”

Gregory snorted. “Temporarily? I never want to see you in this house again!”

Aunt Dianne gasped. “Lord Blithely! How dare you speak to my niece in such a tone? If only you knew-”

"Aunt Dianne!" Madeline pleaded. "Let's not make matters worse. We should leave."

Madeline knew her aunt was about to tell Gregory that she was a duke's daughter, although her memory had not yet quite come to grips that they were currently in the very same Duke's house. *It's better that way.*

“But he's behaving rudely!” Aunt Dianne argued. “Put him in his place, Madeline.”

“I will, but not right now,” she promised. “This isn't the time. Please, let us go.” Madeline turned to the confused Duke, seeing the doubt Gregory had created. “Thank you for allowing us unto your home, Your Grace. I'm deeply sorry for the debacle caused today. Good day.”

Taking her aunt's arm, Madeline left the room, not stopping until they stepped outside and into the carriage. Convincing the Duke of her identity would not be as straightforward as she initially thought, but that did not mean she was giving up.

Chapter 7

Gregory seethed as he watched Madeline and her aunt leave the room. He followed at a distance to ensure they were indeed leaving the property. He muttered and cursed under his breath the entire way.

“Who does she think she is? How dare she come in here and upset the Duke?”

It was a good thing he had decided to see the Duke or the man would have been duped by this beautiful imposter!

“I wondered why her carriage was entering the Duke's estate. I actually thought she was potentially lost and needed help.”

Gregory had been ready to help her, but something had made him slow his horse's pace and follow from a distance. Madeline was not the sort of woman to get her directions wrong. If she was coming to the Duke, it was obviously for a reason.

“Never did I think she was here to lie about her identity!”

The nerve of the woman! Gregory had entered the house moments after Madeline and her aunt, surprised to find no one at the door. Usually, the butler would be the first to open the door and announce a visitor to the Duke. When Gregory heard a door close somewhere ahead, he immediately put his ear on all the doors until he heard voices in the green parlour. It had been Duchess' favourite parlour and the one where the Duke spent most of his time. Gregory had found it

odd that the man had decided to see Madeline in this room and not the visitor's room.

"He never receives strangers in this room."

Hearing the Duke call Madeline '*Hyacinth*' had surprised him, and suddenly Gregory recalled thinking the woman looked like someone familiar.

"I was foolish not to have picked up on it sooner. The Duke has paintings of his wife and daughter dotted about the second and third floor. I should have remembered."

The Duke evidently had believed Madeline was his wife back from the dead and had been quite distraught. Just as he had thought to reveal his presence and come to the Duke's rescue, he heard Madeline calm him down with her soothing voice.

"Even I had felt soothed, although I was not the one in distress. The woman must be a master manipulator."

Any typical man would have entered the room at that point, but Gregory had hung back, wanting to hear what else the woman would say. Never had he expected her to claim to be the Duke's dead daughter. Only then had he burst inside, but the damage was done.

For years, women showed up to the Duke's house claiming to be the Duchess or Lady Russell. Gregory had to admit that many of them had been believable, but thorough investigations eventually proved each woman an imposter. After a while, Gregory took it upon himself to

stop anyone getting to the Duke and giving a sob story. Unfortunately, a few would always slip through the cracks. Today was the first time the Duke had ever called a woman '*Hyacinth*'. Usually, imposters would come with a story about how their features had changed over the years, or that the sea air had ravaged them and left them changed forever.

"I know the Duke could tell these women were imposters, but he was so desperate for their lies to be true that he would believe them."

How was it that Madeline had come to look so much like the Duchess? She had fooled the Duke with just her physical appearance- imagine what she could have done had Gregory not walked in when he did?

"She would have convinced the Duke, and there would have been nothing I could have done about it."

Gregory could tell this time wasn't like the others. The Duke had seemed emotional and overcome, and probably should not be left alone right now. Hurrying back to the parlour, Gregory hoped he could speak some sense into the Duke.

"I may have stopped Miss Spencer now, but there's no telling what she might do in the future. I saw the determination in her eyes to prove herself. What if she succeeds?"

If she did, what did she expect to achieve from her lie? Wealth? A noble family? Gregory didn't know.

He found the Duke with his head bowed, and hands clasped in his lap.

“Your Grace?” Gregory called.

The man looked up, smiling sadly. “I thought she was Hyacinth. She looks exactly like my Hyacinth.”

“But she's not your wife, Your Grace. The Duchess died over twenty years ago.”

“I know, but she could be my daughter.”

Gregory groaned. It was worse than he thought. “Miss Spencer is an imposter, Your Grace. I admit that she looks like the Duchess, but that's mere coincidence.”

“You really think so?” the man questioned. “Do you think it possible for someone to look so much alike and not be related?”

“I do,” Gregory said truthfully. “I once heard of a theory that somewhere in the world is your twin. Nature must have recreated a look-alike, and now she wishes to take advantage of that.”

The Duke shook his head. “I don't know, Gregory. I felt drawn to her, and when she touched my arm, it felt familiar. What if she is my Charlotte?”

Madeline had really done an excellent job tricking the Duke. *I should have stopped her before she came to see the Duke.*

“But why now?” Gregory tried to reason. “Why after twenty-two years?”

“Charlotte would have been twenty-five. Do you know how old Miss Spencer is?”

Gregory kept quiet. He knew how old the woman was, but admitting it was not in his favour.

“Gregory?” the Duke pressed.

“I... I do not know, Your Grace,” he lied.

“Lying is not your strong point, young man. I take it the young woman is also twenty-five?”

Gregory sighed. “Yes, but that's all coincidence. For all we know, she could be lying about her age. Marcia believes she's twenty-one or twenty-two.”

“Hyacinth always looked younger than her age. When I first saw her, I could hardly believe she was seventeen.”

The man's eyes were misting over with remembrance. *If I don't bring him out of this right now, she'll win.*

"But you must admit this woman cannot be Hyacinth, Your Grace."

"No," the Duke agreed. "This woman is too young to be Hyacinth. I was foolish to believe so, but for a moment, I felt an inexplicable joy in my heart when I saw her. When I realised what I was seeing was impossible, I thought it was her spirit come to haunt me. It was my fault she ran away. If I had been more patient and understanding, she might have been alive today, and I would still have my Charlotte."

The Duke's voice broke at the end as he turned away, hiding the grief on his face. *A curse on Madeline for bringing all of this to the surface!*

"You loved your wife, Your Grace, and I doubt there was another father who adored his daughter as much as you did. It was unfair that they were ripped away from you so suddenly, but you must not blame yourself for what happened all those years ago."

"But I do!" the Duke cried, turning back to Gregory. "I do blame myself! Do you know that I found one of my wife's diaries the day after she went missing? I imagine she dropped it in her haste to getaway. I was sitting in her room when I noticed the book under the bed. Sometimes, I wish I had never read it, but at least I know what she was going through. She hated being married to me, Gregory. I think she even hated me."

Gregory winced at the pain laced in the man's voice. "What's the use of torturing yourself? The Duchess was a young woman who mistook her husband's love and concern as possession and control. She was too young to understand that the world is a terrible place, and you were

trying to protect her."

The Duke sighed. "If only that was the only reason. You see, I was a jealous husband. I hated it when other men looked at her with unconcealed desire and admiration. I wanted to rip their eyes out! I started to grow afraid Hyacinth would one day leave me for someone younger. By then, I loved her even more than I loved my first wife. Perhaps my love was more obsession, but I just knew I would not be able to handle it if she left me. When she had Charlotte, I thought it would bring us together, but it seemed to widen the gap. I was so desperate for her love that I drove her away."

Gregory ran his fingers through his hair, at a loss of what to say. *I never want to love someone to the extent of madness.* If love reduced a strong man into a shadow of his former self, then it wasn't worth it.

"Take it from me, young man," the Duke continued. "Do not marry a woman young enough to be your daughter. It never works out."

"At this point, I do not know if I wish to get married!" Gregory admitted. "It doesn't seem worth it."

"It is, never mistake that. I do not regret marrying Hyacinth, I only wish I had waited a little while longer. Perhaps by then, she would have married someone else, but at least I would not have ruined her life and drove her to her death. I might as well have been the one to kill my wife and daughter."

"That's not true!" Gregory protested. "That's not true at all! You did not tell your wife to board that ship, Your Grace. She did that on her own. You did not cause the storm that killed them. How can you blame yourself? I'll make Miss Spencer pay for doing this to you!"

Gregory didn't know how, but he was determined to teach that woman a lesson.

“You will do no such thing,” the Duke commanded. “Leave that woman alone. For all we know, she could be my daughter. Perhaps my wife and daughter never boarded that particular ship, but another. Perhaps our sources were wrong about the entire thing! Who is to say they didn't take on different identities? Who is to say Francesca Spencer was not my wife? That Madeline Spencer is not my daughter? It's possible, isn't it?”

The Duke clearly wanted to believe his words, and he wanted Gregory to agree with him, but Gregory was a realist. *I cannot lie to him.*

“If that were the case, then we would have heard word about them. We sent investigators to America to find out if our sources were wrong about their deaths, but they never found any evidence to suggest the Duchess and Lady Russell made it to their destination.”

The Duke smiled sadly. “You won't even let me have that hope, will you?”

“I refuse to lie to you, Your Grace. Not at your expense. Giving you this false hope will do more damage.”

“I suppose you're right.”

"I know I'm right. I want you to promise me that if Miss Spencer tries to speak to you again, and I happen to not be around you, you'll ask her to leave. Don't believe a word she says."

The Duke didn't immediately agree. Was the man still considering Miss Spencer's lies? *Her act must have been convincing for the Duke to not immediately take my advice.*

"I want you to look into her story," the man finally said. "Find out who she really is. I cannot get past her resemblance to my late wife, neither do I want to. I know that you would prefer I forget all about this, but there was something about her that I cannot let go. Will you do this for me, or am I asking too much of you?"

The Duke had just put him in a difficult position. *I do not appreciate this woman interfering in our lives, and I'm going to let her know it. I would rather run her out of the Duke's life, but she has created enough doubt to make him wonder if her story is true.*

"Your answer, Gregory, if you please."

"I will agree to your request if you agree to wait for proof before making any decisions concerning Miss Spencer. She is not to be trusted- I need you to understand this."

The old man smiled. "I know that you do not trust her, but I feel inclined to. Even if she isn't my Charlotte, I wouldn't mind getting to know more about her. If she's after my money, she'll have a hard time getting to it. Not even I'm foolish enough to believe everything that comes out of a woman's mouth."

Gregory wasn't so sure about that. Madeline Spencer was the type of woman who could wrap any man around her little finger. Who knew what she could do to convince the Duke to part with his money? Part of the man's wealth would fall to Gregory one day, but that wasn't the reason why he was so against Miss Spencer. *I merely hate that she has opened up closed wounds and brought heartache back into the Duke's life.*

"I promise to find out all I can about Miss Spencer, but you must promise to seal your heart from her devious ways."

The Duke nodded. "Agreed."

Gregory held out his hand. "We'll shake on it to seal our word."

The Duke chuckled. "I see you do not trust me."

"It's that woman I do not trust."

"I've never heard you be so fearful of a woman before. Did I hear you say earlier that this woman is your tenant?"

Scared? Him? Never! "I am certainly not afraid of Miss Spencer!"

Still laughing, the man took his hand. "I'll just have to take your word for it, but I think this woman might bring a lot of excitement into our lives. I, for one, look forward to something different."

Gregory did not share the same sentiments. Madeline Spencer was trouble with a capital 'T'.

Chapter 8

That man clearly did not know who she was. Gregory Montgomery had become a thorn in Madeline's side overnight, but she wouldn't allow that thorn to influence her negatively.

"I'll bet he thinks he has somehow won, but there is still a war to be fought."

Winning one battle meant absolutely nothing in Madeline Spencer's books. Now, she was more determined than ever before to prove her identity to the Duke.

"Is it not obvious that I am my mother's daughter? Even the Duke believed me to be Mama!"

Sucking in a breath, Madeline released it in a short burst of air. Why was she allowing this man to affect her?

"Not even Alexander has ever aroused more than intense irritation. Lord Blithely, on the other hand, has earned my disdain and anger."

An angry Madeline Spencer was a rarity, and she hated that a virtual stranger had moved her emotions to such extremities.

"Fool! Blithering frog's spawn!"

“Are you still in such a foul mood?” Rebecca asked from the doorway. “I’m doubtful that a nice pot of tea will do you any good, but I nevertheless brought it.”

“Perhaps, tea will soothe me.”

The woman came in, arranged Madeline's tea and a plate of biscuits, then promptly sat down with a sigh.

“Is this about Lord Blithely?”

“It's about his actions,” Madeline corrected. “The Duke would have believed me if that foolish viscount had not interfered when he did. Can you believe he called me an imposter?”

“I see we're about to go through the same argument again,” Rebecca remarked. “It's not like you to revisit one thing over and over again. This man has certainly affected you, hasn't he? I've never known a man to do that.”

Madeline didn't like the way Rebecca made that sound. “He's nothing but scum between my toes, and let me tell you that I know precisely what that feels like. It's disgusting.”

Rebecca laughed. “Oh, how I wish I had accompanied you to the Duke's house!”

"Why? To witness a fool talk about things he doesn't know? He has dealt a small blow to the wrong person, but I will deal a larger blow that will knock him off his feet. He'll be red-faced when he realises that he was wrong and I was right."

"How do you propose to do that?"

"I don't know yet," Madeline confessed. "But I have to think about something. I wouldn't put it past Lord Blithely to believe I'm after the Duke's money. Papa is likely as rich as him! What need do I have of the man's money? It seems Lord Blithely might have designs on the Duke's money."

Madeline didn't really believe that, but it did make her feel better to think so.

"According to Mrs Winters, Lord Blithely is well off," Rebecca commented. "Not wealthy like your father or the Duke, but he has made some good investments in years past. He doesn't seem to be a man obsessed with money."

"Oh, I know that! I just want to think badly about him, that's all."

"What about your mother's letters and diary?" Rebecca suggested.

Madeline had thought about that, but she had quickly decided against it. Gregory would probably say she had forged or somehow stolen the letters. If she gave the letters to him, there was every chance Gregory would destroy them to 'protect the Duke.'

“No, that wouldn't work. Lord Blithely has made up his mind not to trust me, so I doubt a bunch of letters would help. I need something else Mama would have had on her person during our voyage to America. I'm sure the Duke would have gone through her things to see what was missing. If I'm not mistaken, Mama did have some old jewellery worth thousands.”

“Yes,” Rebecca agreed. “I do remember some beautiful antique pieces. What if one of them is a Russell family heirloom? That would certainly prove your identity! What if you drew a picture of one of them and give it to the Duke?”

Gregory would ensure Madeline could not come anywhere near the Duke, so drawing a picture was useless.

“Lord Blithely will probably get hold of it and destroy it before the Duke can see it. I think I might have to write home and ask Papa to send anything he believes will help me prove my identity. I will stress that I will not return home until the Duke believes I am who I say I am. I'm not looking for another father, but I do want that viscount to eat his words.”

Madeline was also doing it for the Duke. The man had seemed desperate to believe she was Charlotte, but Gregory had snatched that away from him, and all for what?

“So, this is about the viscount.”

“No,” Madeline denied. “This is about proving myself, and in the

process proving that man wrong. I think he needs to be brought down a notch or two."

Rebecca smiled. "I don't doubt you'll do it. I do somewhat feel sorry for Lord Blithely. He has no notion of what he is up against. Not many have dared to challenge you."

"He'll know that soon enough," Madeline said darkly. "Would you fetch me my writing material? The sooner I send this letter, the better. In the meantime, I think I should involve myself a little more in what's happening around us."

"What do you mean?" Rebecca asked, getting the materials from Madeline's writing desk. "You've already had countless visitors to the house, and you've yet to accept any invitations to attend dinner parties and the like."

"I know that. I first wanted to get a feel of this *Ton* I keep hearing about. Apparently, they are the ones who can make or break a person's reputation. I do not know a lot about English ways, and I certainly do not wish to commit a faux pas before the very people I need to impress."

Madeline wanted to walk in her mother's shoes, to get to know the life she used to live. Part of the reason for coming to England was to understand why she was reduced to making such a drastic decision that affected so many lives. *If I am to do that, I have to become part of the society she grew up in. Perhaps I'll find a few relatives willing to open up about Mama's life here.*

"But you've never had to impress anyone," Rebecca argued. "Being yourself has naturally drawn people to you."

"That was in America, this is another country with different rules in society. What worked at home may not work here. Furthermore, I have Lord Blithely to contend with. I cannot put a foot out of place, or he'll win."

"How do you intend to keep him from badmouthing you?" Rebecca asked.

"Well, I do not think Lord Blithely is so uncouth as to spread rumours about me. He will most certainly wait for me to do something wrong and capitalise on that. The only way to render him incapable of doing a thing is to keep him close. Have you ever heard of the saying 'keep your friends close, but your enemies closer?'"

"More times than I care to count. I doubt Lord Blithely will wish to spend any time with you."

Rebecca was right, but what if he was forced to? Madeline smiled as an idea came to her.

"What if we host a dinner party?"

"Already? But we just arrived here! Imagine all the preparations to go into hosting a dinner party with the flare we're used to?"

"I'm confident Camilla will help us with all the English details. We already have English servants, an English cook, and some English

friends. I'm certain we can come up with something in the next two weeks."

Rebecca shook her head. "I do not like this idea at all. I suppose you're going to invite Lord Blithely?"

"Precisely. I'll invite him and his family and word the invitation so that they will be obliged to come. You know how persuasive I can be."

"That's just the problem, isn't it?" Rebecca muttered.

Madeline laughed, reaching out to pat her abigail's hand. "Cheer up, Becca. Everything will go swimmingly. Once I have proved myself and found out all I wish to know, we'll be on the first ship back to America. I certainly do not intend to stay here any longer than we have to. Besides, I promised my family I would be back before Christmas, and I intend to keep that promise."

If Madeline had to work day and night to get what she wanted out of her stay in England, then she would do so.

"Something tells me this trip will be more work than I intended," Rebecca grumbled.

"Your mother would be so proud," Madeline grinned.

Rebecca stuck her tongue out, only making Madeline laugh harder. If anyone but her inner circle saw her abigail do that, they would

probably think the young woman disrespected her. *That's the problem with this social class issue. It's taken as taboo for different classes to interact, and yet we can learn so much from those who walk a different path.*

“You should probably tell your aunt about your intentions,” Rebecca suggested.

“You're right. Aunt Dianne would not like to be kept in the dark, especially not after what happened at the Duke's house. Did I tell you Aunt was ready for a fight?”

“Your sweet aunt?”

Madeline nodded. “The one and only. I think she was defending my honour. I could have been the one in the wrong, but she still would have stood up for me. Is it any wonder she's my favourite aunt?”

Aunt Dianne had been Madeline's first choice as her chaperone. Madeline had been worried her aunt would refuse to come as she was a homebody and preferred reading in her garden than travelling across the world on an adventure. Fortunately, Aunt Dianne had agreed without much pleading, but Madeline had to agree to her aunt presenting her with suitors once they returned home. It was a small sacrifice to make. *I hope.*

“I'll write this letter home while you make another pot of tea to butter up Aunt Dianne. She's not so keen on having the English for dinner-literally and figuratively.”

Rebecca went off to do just that, still visibly unimpressed with the prospect of hosting a dinner party. *We'll make it work; I know we will.*

Madeline studied her guest list, not knowing most of the people Camilla had added. Days had passed since her decision to host a dinner party, but now she was regretting it. It was becoming increasingly apparent she was in way over her head.

"How can I invite people I do not know?" she asked.

Camilla raised her eyebrows. "Do you know anyone besides the few busybodies who came to call on you? Those are not the type of people you want at your first dinner party. Perhaps a garden tea, yes, but not an elegant dinner party. These people will ensure your name is spread favourably among the *Ton*."

"I suppose I'll have to take your word for it. Have you managed to get me invites to any balls?"

"The balls that matter usually have closed lists, and are fiendishly difficult to get in," Camilla said apologetically. "I'm hoping this dinner party will open doors for you. On the bright side, you have been invited to attend a riding party with a few young ladies and gentlemen. One of them- Patricia Lockhart- has parents who hold lots of sway in our world. Impress her, and I guarantee you'll receive more than just invitations from gossipmongers."

Madeline had hoped Lady Blithely would give a good word in to the right ear, but that had fallen flat. While everyone seemed interested in Madeline, none of the right people seemed prepared to give her a chance into their world. It was disappointing, to say the least.

"Perhaps I'm coming across too strongly. I'm afraid being loud and flamboyant has not done me any favours here."

"That's not true," said Camilla. "It was your nature that attracted people to you in the first place. You're trying to infiltrate our society's most inner circle, and they're infamous for being closed off. Do not give up just yet, Maddy. Go to this riding party. Before you know it, you'll walk amongst the *crème de la crème*."

Madeline sighed but nodded. "You're the expert. Now that the list is sorted, how many courses do you think we should serve?"

"I would say seven to twelve courses. Nothing more, nothing less."

Madeline didn't flinch as she was used to throwing parties with countless courses. Once, she had organised a whopping twenty courses, but it was so tiring for her and the servants that they never attempted it again.

"Should I hire another cook and a few more servants for the party?"

"I think that's best," Camilla agreed. "I'll find extra servants or ask my husband to allow you the use of ours. We won't need them as we'll be here."

The women continued to discuss late into the afternoon until Madeline felt reasonably good about the dinner party. However, all the planning in the world would mean nothing without the right execution. *I suppose I'll just have to get it right or leave England with my*

tail between my legs.

Chapter 9

Gregory helped his mother out of the carriage, hardly able to believe he was attending a dinner party hosted by Madeline. After what had transpired between them the last time, he had thought she would never willingly wish to see him again. *I am either wrong, or she's planning her revenge and needs me close to her.*

"Thank you, son," his mother said. "Help your sister- you know she's clumsy down steps."

Marcia's puce-coloured dress appeared first before he saw her face. *I do not understand what possess women to wear such a terrible colour!* There were so many other colours to choose from, but his sister had to go with something that resembled an excretion.

"Do not let me go until both my feet reach the ground, Gregory," his sister ordered. "I do not wish to make myself the laughingstock of this dinner by falling on my face."

"I have no intentions of letting go," he said drily.

Although he wished to. Gregory required something light-hearted these days, but the opportunity continued to evade him. *I blame it on that woman. She's sucked every ounce of happiness from me, I'm sure of it.* Gregory did not know how Madeline did it, but he was reasonably confident his dreary feelings were her fault.

Walking his sister and mother to the door, Gregory was surprised by

how full the house sounded. *How did she manage to find so many people to invite? I suspect they're your average Londoner with little influence where it matters. I daresay my family, and I will be the only people worth having at the dinner party.* However, when he got inside, Gregory realised he was wrong. How on earth had she managed to convince so many affluent and influential people to attend her dinner party?

"This seems to be a rather grand event," his mother commented. "I didn't know Miss Spencer knew so many people of the *Ton*."

Gregory was almost certain Madeline did not know any of these people, but they had nevertheless attended the party.

"I see Miss Spencer," said Marcia. "Shall we go and greet her?"

"You and mother can do that. I've seen someone I simply must speak to."

Gregory was lying, but he couldn't tell his mother and sister why he didn't want to talk to Madeline. *I prefer to avoid her for the time being until I can gather what her intentions are towards me.* The women walked off while Gregory looked for someone to speak to. He decided on a man he vaguely recognised but couldn't for the life of him recall his name.

More than five minutes of polite talk must have gone past when he spotted his mother and Marcia making their way over to him with Madeline in tow.

"Oh, no," he groaned.

“Did you say something, Lord Blithely?” his nameless companion asked.

“I said it's a great party,” Gregory lied.

“I think so. Miss Spencer certainly knows how to throw a party.”

The man spoke with admiration that grated on Gregory's nerves. *What does he know of Miss Spencer? Likely nothing at all.*

“It seems our hostess is coming our way,” the man needlessly said. “I hear she is unattached and comes from a wealthy family in America. Do you know anything about it, Lord Blithely?”

“The woman is a spinster,” Gregory found himself saying.

“A beautiful one,” the man added. “Twenty-five is hardly an age to place a woman on the shelf. Besides, she looks more so your sister's age. I wonder what it would be like to possess a woman like her?”

Gregory didn't like the sound of that at all. “You do not possess a woman, you marry her.”

“It's the same thing,” the man shrugged. “Perhaps I'll try my charms on Miss Spencer and secure myself a handsome inheritance.”

Disgusted with his companion, Gregory decided to ignore him and focus on the women approaching them. Miss Spencer looked lovely in a pink silk dress that accentuated her rosy complexion. She looked like royalty and his mother and sister the servants, but they carried the higher social status.

“Lord Blithely, I'm so glad you could make my dinner party,” Madeline said, holding out a gloved hand.

Gregory heard her polite words but picked up on the irritation beneath them. *So, she has not put our little argument behind her.* Neither had he. He laid the barest of kisses on the back of her hand, applying slight pressure to her hand before releasing it. Gregory bit back a grin when he noticed her eyes flare-up. *Why am I goading her?* He didn't know.

“You look stunning this evening, Miss Spencer. Thank you for inviting my family and me. We were most surprised when we received your invitation the other day.”

“Oh, Lord Blithely! How can I not invite your family when you have been so gracious to me? I had to return the favour.”

“You're simply beautiful and gracious,” the man beside him commented. “Any person would jump at the chance to attend a party hosted by you.”

“Why, thank you, Mr Jones,” Madeline smiled. “You're too kind. Would you please excuse me? I must make my rounds again, or some

guests will accuse me of favouring one over the other, and I cannot have that, can I?"

Gregory watched her walk away for a moment until he realised other men were covetously watching her as well. *She has the attention of every man in this room and the admiration of every woman. How does she do it?*

"Gregory, would you get me something to drink?" his mother asked. "I feel parched."

To get to the refreshment table would mean walking right past Madeline. *She might think I'm following her around. Is there another way to get there?*

"Gregory?" his mother repeated. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes, of course," he said with some impatience. "What will you drink?"

"Champagne would be lovely. Your sister will have a little wine."

Gregory nodded distractedly, still trying to figure out a way past Madeline. Fortunately, the woman moved to another group of guests, giving him a wide path to the table.

"Thank goodness!"

It occurred to him that he was putting a lot of work into avoiding a woman he couldn't stop thinking about. *It's normal to think about one's enemy.*

At the refreshment table, Gregory greeted two barons he schooled with but soon regretted it when they started to talk about their hostess.

"You seem to know her well, Gregory," Crawley commented. "I hear you're her landlord."

"For the time being," Gregory felt he had to say. "She'll be returning to America as soon as she concludes whatever she came to do."

"America must have many beauties if she's anything to go by," said Finney. "Perhaps I should find myself an American girl."

"Yes," Crawley agreed. "Best you find another American girl because I've got my sights set on our delectable Miss Spencer."

Finny laughed. "What makes you think she would marry the likes of you? She must have spurned dozens of suitors in America. She needs a real man to tame her wild nature."

"Which neither of you is if you talk about women in such a fashion," Gregory bit out. "If you would excuse me?"

Gregory grabbed whatever drinks were closest to him and left the men before his fists itched. Hearing them talk about Madeline as though she were a piece of meat had angered him, and he would have said more, but he had a feeling the two barons would read too much into him coming to her defence. Walking past another group of young men, Gregory found Madeline the centre of attention. He paused behind a large fellow, keeping himself hidden.

“You've certainly brightened up our lives since your arrival, Miss Spencer,” one claimed. “Is there any chance you might marry one of us and stay?”

Gregory heard Madeline laugh. “I'm afraid that isn't possible, gentleman. I'm afraid that I must return to my home once I've met all my goals here.”

If one of her goals was to fool the Duke into believing she's his daughter, why would she return home? Wouldn't it make more sense to stay?

The men made noises of disappointment, each one trying to outdo the other. *Pathetic*. Shaking his head, Gregory returned to his mother and sister and was pleased to find his companion had moved away. He handed the drinks to the women, surprised when they immediately protested.

“This isn't champagne, Gregory,” his mother complained. “Were you not looking?”

No, he had been too busy coming to Madeline's defence. “Indeed? I must have picked up the wrong glass by mistake. Let me go fetch the

right beverage.”

Gregory was stopped from doing so when Madeline announced that dinner was ready. Escorting the women to the dining room, Gregory noticed the mad dash to sit next to their hostess. What was wrong with these men? They were behaving as though she was the only woman left on earth. Gregory wasn't quite sure how it happened but somehow, he ended up sitting next to Madeline. *She appears as surprised as I am. How on earth did we manage this feat without intending to?* It was beyond him.

“Is everything to your liking, Lord Blithely?” she asked after the first course.

Gregory couldn't fault anything so far and said so. This earned him a smile, albeit a small one.

Madeline's attention was soon grabbed by another man, and another man after him, and another man... *She has hardly paid any mind to me although I'm sitting right beside her.* Any good hostess would attend to her guests equally, but Madeline had all but ignored him. *Why should that bother me? I have not forgotten the pain she caused the Duke with her little lie. His Grace expects me to find out everything I can about this woman, but I can't help but feel that I should spend my time far away from her.*

“I hear you own an animal sanctuary,” said a guest. “Do you tame the animals yourself?”

“I don't know if I tame them, but I do give them a lot of attention and love. I believe even the most vicious of animals recognise and respond to love. I have a bear who enjoys hugging people. Unfortunately, most

people would sooner run from him than allow him to hug them. I suppose it helps to have raised many of them from babies, but others I rescued from hunter's traps and nursed them back to health. I've received my own fair share of cuts and bruises in the process, but I wouldn't change it for anything."

Everyone seemed to hang on her every word and begged her to tell them more about her 'wild' life in America. *They are enamoured with her. She must be using a word spell to have them so riveted.*

Everyone retired to the drawing-room where Madeline immediately went to the pianoforte and played a jolly tune. Much to everyone's delight she started singing and soon had half the room singing along with her. *She's certainly not the best singer, but I rather admire the purity of her voice.* There were many things Gregory found himself admiring about Madeline, serving to annoy him further.

"I do not need this right now," he muttered.

"What don't you need, dear?" his mother asked.

She had heard him, over all this noise? "A headache. I have a headache and all this noise is merely exacerbating it."

"Why don't you step outside for a bit of fresh air? You might feel better then."

And miss all of this? Gregory felt a need to stay and keep an eye on Madeline, arguing it was for the Duke's sake.

“No, I'll be fine, Mother. I'm sure the singing will end soon.”

Gregory was right about the singing ending with a round of applause, but Madeline soon called for someone else to play the pianoforte. Crawley stepped up to the instrument, kissing Madeline on the hand before arranging himself with more care than was necessary. The baron played a dancing tune that had all the men scrambling to ask for Madeline's hand.

“Fools, all of them,” Gregory muttered darkly.

Madeline had to have passed him eight times before Gregory stepped in and took her hand. He couldn't work out what made him do it, but he was tired of watching her dance with others.

“May I have this dance, Miss Spencer?” he asked.

Madeline brow furrowed slightly, making Gregory wonder if she was about to reject him in front of everyone. To his pleasure, she nodded.

“I'd love to.”

Whether it was relief at avoiding a public humiliation, or the simple pleasure of dancing with a woman, Gregory felt a warm feeling uncurl in his abdomen. He found Madeline light and nimble on her feet, concluding she had to be the best dance partner he has had to date.

The dance ended too soon, and he was forced to hand her over to the next waiting man.

“You looked like you enjoyed that, son,” his mother remarked. “Miss Spencer is a fine dancer.”

Gregory was mortified by his mother's comment. “I was smiling for the benefit of the audience.”

“Oh, is that what it was?” his mother mused.

Thinking it wise to remain quiet, Gregory focused on the other dancing couples, berating himself for his lack of control. Later in the carriage ride home, he couldn't stop thinking about how perfectly Madeline had fitted in his arms.

Lydia Montgomery could see her son was not behaving like his usual self. He appeared to be going through an internal struggle, and he was losing. The carriage ride home was a good a time as any to find out what was wrong.

“Son, how did you find the dinner party? It seems Miss Spencer pulled it off remarkably well.”

“I'm not surprised by anything she does, Mother.”

That was an odd statement. “Oh? What do you mean by that?”

Gregory shook his head. "Nothing at all."

That wasn't good enough for Lydia. "But son, you must mean something by it."

"If a woman can pose to be the Duke's daughter and almost convince him, she can do anything."

What? Gregory seemed to be speaking to himself more than anything else, but Lydia heard his words loud and clear.

"Charlotte Russell has been dead for twenty-two years, son," Lydia reasoned. "Surely, no one can pretend to be her."

"You could if you looked exactly like the Duke's dead wife. The resemblance is uncanny."

Oh, my Lord! He's right! Why hadn't Lydia picked up on that before? No wonder I felt as though I had seen her somewhere. What were the chances of Hyacinth's look-alike turning up and pretending to be the Duke's daughter? I suppose that's why she left America to come all the way here. She must be after the inheritance. That didn't sit well with Lydia. If Madeline Spencer manages to convince the Duke that she is Charlotte, she will receive a massive inheritance upon the Duke's death. She would take everything my son should have and take away my opportunity to be the mistress of Russell House.

"I can't let that happen."

“I beg your pardon?” said Gregory.

“Nothing, son. Why don't you rest your eyes for a moment? You seem rather tired.”

Gregory nodded sleepily. “I might do just that. Marcia fell asleep the moment we entered the carriage.”

“It has been a long night. Sleep, dear. I'll wake you up once we return home.”

And hopefully, by then, Lydia would have a plan to get Madeline Spencer out of her way.

Chapter 10

Madeline drummed her fingers on her lap, wishing the driver would go faster.

“I should have told him it was an emergency,” she muttered. “I could have journeyed to America and returned to England at the rate he's going. Better yet, I could have just walked.”

"Patience is a virtue, dear," her aunt reminded her.

“Seldom in women, and never in men.”

Her aunt smiled. “Your mother would always say that, and yet your father is the most patient man I have ever met.”

Madeline wanted to ask her which father she meant, but she knew her aunt spoke of the only man Madeline had ever known to be her father. *Until recently, that is. I hope Papa has forgiven me for coming all this way to meet my birth father. I know he was not keen on the notion but 'tis challenging to live your life knowing that you once had a different one.*

“I need some of Papa's patience right now before I demand to take over the reins and drive this carriage myself.”

Aunt Dianne reached out to pat her hand. “Calm down, dear. The ball is some weeks away, you know. There will be ample time to have your

dress made.”

“But the sooner I speak to Camilla, the better I shall feel. To receive an invitation to the Totnes Ball is not a small thing, Aunt. I must make a good impression.”

"Which you will," her aunt assured. "If anyone is able to thrive in a social setting, 'tis you, my dear."

Madeline certainly hoped so. When a footman delivered the elaborate invitation earlier this morning, she had been both excited and relieved. Those emotions had soon given way to the frantic worry that she wouldn't fit in. Only the upper echelons of society attended such a ball- Camilla had told her so. Having an invite proved that Madeline was indeed making her mark in London (finally!), but now lay the task of living up to the ball's standards. *I have absolutely nothing to wear, and I do not have the details of an excellent seamstress at my disposal.*

Had she been back home, such a thing would not have caused her to fret because every seamstress worth their salt wished to design and make gowns for her. Having Madeline wear their creations was free advertising because everyone tended to copy her style. However, England was a different matter altogether. Camilla would have to guide Madeline's footsteps because she couldn't afford to commit a faux pas in her attire or behaviour.

They were currently on their way to see the woman, but the trip seemed to be taking much longer than Madeline remembered.

It took what felt like another hour but was most likely twenty minutes to reach Aiden and Camilla's townhouse, and as Madeline climbed

down the carriage steps, she prayed her friend would be home.

“I should have sent a footman to see if she was available today, but my impatience got the better of me. If I've wasted my time coming here...”

It would only serve to further frazzle her nerves. Madeline could count on one hand the number of times her nerves had gotten the better of her, and this was certainly one of them. So much depended on this ball that it made her wonder what would happen if she was unsuccessful at infiltrating the very society her mother had lived in. *I never thought that I would become so invested in finding out about my mother's life in England and proving my identity to the Duke.*

Madeline wondered if it had anything to do with proving Gregory wrong, and perhaps that was a small part of it, but England was a part of her prior life, and she had every right to know about it. *Lord Blithely can say whatever he wishes, but none of his words will dissuade me from finding out about my past.*

Inviting him to her dinner party had been the best way to prove this, but it hadn't happened precisely the way she had hoped. Madeline had wanted to act calm and polite, playing the gracious host whilst ignoring him. It was a fine line to tread, but she had believed she was managing just fine until she realised Gregory kept looking at her.

Madeline had tried to ignore him as much as possible, but she couldn't shake off the sensation of his pale green eyes on her. It was unnerving, actually. For a woman who was accustomed to stares, she felt slightly undone by his. Imagine Madeline's surprise when she danced with him! It had been a somewhat tense moment, to say the least.

Gregory was undoubtedly an excellent dancer, and it may just have been in Madeline's imagination, but had she not fitted him well? It felt as though she had been dancing with him all her life, but that was utterly ridiculous. Perhaps the heat of the room and the constant moving about from guest to guest had dulled her common sense. It had been a rather lively evening, but wholly successful. Madeline had spent much of the following day resting in bed, only rousing at midday. *I believe the evening's success largely contributed to the invitation I received this morning.*

"Should we not make our presence known, dear?" asked Aunt Dianne, interrupting her thoughts.

Madeline coloured. *When did Aunt get down?* "Yes, of course. I was merely thinking about what we should do if Camilla is not in residence."

"I imagine we leave a message and return home," her aunt said a tad amused. "What else can we do?"

The sense her aunt spoke deepened the rosy hue of Madeline's cheeks. "That seems like the best solution. Would you like me to help you along the path?"

Aunt Dianne had injured her ankle the night of the dinner party, and now used an ornate walking stick they had managed to find in Oxford Street.

"No, dear. You go on ahead and see if Camilla is home. I shall slowly follow behind you. If, by any chance, she is out, at least I will only be halfway there and can turn back having not wasted an entire walk."

Madeline nodded. "Very well, but if you should feel the tiniest twinge of growing pain, we shall return home."

She felt somewhat guilty dragging her aunt along in her condition, but Madeline could not do without a chaperone. Jeremiah had managed to carry Aunt Dianne to the carriage and gently place her inside, but when Madeline insisted the woman stay in the carriage while she spoke with Camilla, she would not hear of it. *Aunt Dianne loves to be in the thick of anything happening.* Madeline thought of her mother. *Mama loved drama, intrigue, excitement- anything that wasn't dull.*

Her mother had undoubtedly received just that when she made the bold move to run away from England and begin a new life in America. It must have been frightening, but her need to get away from the Duke had been stronger. Madeline did not know the man at all, but he didn't seem to be the man her mother had described in her diary. The Duke had appeared broken, and nothing like the man her mother had once unwillingly called husband. Perhaps the loss of a second wife and child had weakened him, or Madeline's mother had simply mistaken the man's protectiveness and love.

"She was young, and he was old. I suppose it could easily happen."

There had to be more to her mother and the Duke's story than what Madeline currently knew.

Tapping the knocker three times, Madeline stood back, hoping Camilla was indeed home.

"Please, please, please," she prayed under her breath.

A female servant answered the door and immediately recognised her.
"Good day, Miss Spencer."

"Good day, Molly. Is Mrs Winters home?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes, Miss. She's in her parlour writing a few letters. Please, come in. Mrs Winters gave me the strict order to admit you without the need to gain permission."

Madeline's shoulders dipped as they relaxed. "Thank you, Molly. One moment while I get my aunt." Madeline turned, hurrying towards Aunt Dianne. "Camilla is thankfully at home, Aunt. It must be Providence."

"Now, there was no need to worry, was there? Come, help me hobble to the house so we can set your mind at rest. I'm certain that resourceful young woman knows a seamstress or two with excellent credentials."

Madeline took one arm while her aunt rested the other on the stick, and together they moved faster than one would think of an injured woman. Peering closely at the woman's face, Madeline noted the strain.

"Why are you pushing yourself, Aunt Dianne? Camilla is here- there is no need to rush. Take your time."

"You don't have to-" her aunt began.

"What on earth happened to you, Mrs Abbot?!" interrupted Camilla, hurrying towards them. "And why are you out and about in this condition?"

"It's the very thing I scolded her about," said Madeline. "But she refuses to listen to reason. Aunt Dianne sprained her ankle while dancing with a sprightly young fellow."

Camilla raised her eyebrows. "You don't say? When did this happen, because I do not recall any of it?"

"Soon after you left," Madeline explained. "My aunt suddenly got her second wind of energy and grabbed the first willing partner."

"Dear me!" Camilla exclaimed. "Did you have the physician look at it?"

"Would you two stop?" her aunt demanded. "I am not some fragile woman who allows a light sprain to dictate her life. Besides, we are at the front door, and soon I'll be sitting and resting the injury."

Madeline looked up, surprised to see they had indeed made it to the door. "So you're right, Aunt. Would you have a compress made for Aunt Dianne, Camilla? It'll help while she rests it."

"Of course. I'll do it myself while you make your way to the parlour.

Do you fancy a pot of tea and a plate of biscuits? My cook baked them yesterday. They're quite rich and chocolatey, and the perfect accompaniment to tea. I imagine you have something important to tell me hence Mrs Abbot coming out in her condition, but don't tell me anything yet- I want to be seated with a cup in hand."

Camilla hardly took a breath between sentences, before dashing into the house for the compress.

"She reminds me a little of you, but a tad more scatter-brained," Aunt Dianne commented, shaking her head.

"That's what makes her such a great friend. Now, come and let's get you to a chair to rest that ankle."

"Would you relax now, dear?" her aunt pleaded. "We're here now."

But Madeline couldn't relax until she had the name of a seamstress. The sooner she had one, the better she would feel.

"I know of two wonderful seamstresses," said Camilla. "One is French, and the other English. I would go with the English seamstress simply because Madame Laverne has the manners of a camel."

"A camel?" asked Aunt Dianne, clearly intrigued.

"My husband once saw a camel with his own two eyes," Camilla explained. "He described it as rather horrid, with a tendency to spit at you. Madame Laverne can be quite rude, but people put up with it to

claim their dress was made by a Frenchwoman. There is this ridiculous notion going about that French seamstresses are better than English seamstresses. I don't believe that one bit."

"Then an English seamstress it is," said Aunt Dianne. "I'm sure my niece agrees with me."

Madeline was about to say that she would gladly put up with a spitting cobra if it meant her gown for the Totnes Ball would be a grand creation, but Aunt Dianne had seemingly already taken a dislike to the Frenchwoman if the look on her face was anything to go by. The older woman had wrinkled her nose, her upper lip pushed up in a look of sheer disgust.

"I have no qualms with an English seamstress," Madeline eventually said. "When can we see her?"

She hoped today. "I would like to at least meet the woman and hear what sort of vision she has for my dress."

There was the possibility the woman could be busy, but Madeline was praying against that.

Camilla opened her mouth to speak but paused when she looked behind Madeline. "Gregory! What a lovely surprise."

Madeline inwardly groaned. "Of all the people to come here today, it had to be Lord Blithely," she muttered beneath her breath.

She didn't bother turning in her seat to look at the man but busied

herself with her tea. *I hope he leaves now that he sees his cousin has guests.* Had the carriage outside the house not been indication enough? Perhaps not for the man who seemed to think everyone should obey him. Truthfully speaking, Madeline wished to look at him, but her stubborn nature rallied against that. *I want nothing to do with the man.*

“Good day, Cousin,” he greeted. “I was not aware you had guests. How do you do, Mrs Abbot? Miss Spencer?”

Madeline heard him walk further into the room, forcing her to look up.

“Lord Blithely, a pleasure to see you once again,” her aunt said. “Is it not, Madeline?”

Madeline heard the warning in her aunt's voice. Be nice or else. *She knows full well that I dislike the intolerable fellow. Why must she insist?*

Clearing her throat, she gave a slight smile. “Good day, Lord Blithely.”

Madeline noticed how handsome he looked today and hated herself for it. *I have always preferred brunet men, not pale yellow-haired men intent on interfering in family matters.*

Gregory bowed stiffly in her direction and offered a smile to her aunt. *Of course, he would.*

“Perhaps I should come later or tomorrow, Cousin,” he suggested.

Yes! Do that. I refuse to suffer your presence. Madeline sipped her tea, giving him side looks. Gregory cut a fine figure in his day attire, and he was indeed lovely to look at. *If only he were ugly and not such a great dancer.* She choked on her tea as the memory of their dance together flashed in her mind, suffusing her cheeks with warmth.

“Oh, dear me!” Camilla exclaimed. “Did the tea go down the wrong pipe?”

“Something of the sort,” Madeline croaked. “I was simply thinking too hard. Please, do not mind me.”

“Oh, you must be worried about your gown, you poor dear,” Camilla sympathised. “Why doesn't Gregory accompany you to the seamstress?”

“What?” both Madeline and Gregory said together.

“Surely there's no need for that,” Madeline politely objected. “Simply provide me with the address, and I'll be on my way.”

Camilla shook her head. “I couldn't let you do that. Mrs Danbridge's little shop is a tad challenging to find if you're not familiar with the roads. Even I get lost at times, but Gregory knows these London streets like the back of his hand. Is that not so, Gregory?”

“I wouldn't want to impose on his time,” Madeline insisted.

“Nonsense!” said Camilla. “Tell them, Gregory.”

Oh, please say no. Tell your cousin you have something important to take care of and leave, for heaven's sake!

“Of course, I can accompany them,” said Gregory.

Well, that was that. To refuse him at this point would appear rude. “Thank you, Lord Blithely.”

For nothing! Interfering fool.

Madeline remained polite and the perfect Southern girl throughout the carriage ride to the seamstress. Despite her family moving to the north after they freed their slaves and her father bought a gold mine, she still remembered the etiquette rules of a sweet Southern belle, and that included smiling at your enemy no matter how you wished to give him a piece of your mind.

Madeline longed to scold Gregory about his interference between her and the Duke, but her aunt was also with them. It wouldn't do to trouble the woman any more than Madeline already had. *I was the one who wished to meet with Camilla today. I should have left it until tomorrow and allowed Aunt more time off her ankle.* It also would have meant avoiding Gregory altogether. Why did she let him talk her into sending her carriage home and travelling in his?

“I shall have to find a coach to transport us home.”

“Did you say something, Miss Spencer?” Gregory asked.

She had spoken aloud again, hadn't she? “Not at all, my lord. How much further to the seamstress?”

The man looked out of the window. “It appears we're here.”

Thank goodness for that! Madeline wanted out of this carriage right now.

“It was kind of you to bring us here, Lord Blithely,” Aunt Dianne said. “We know you must be a busy man.”

“It's my pleasure to assist, Mrs Abbot. Please, allow me to help you down.”

Gregory got out as soon as the carriage came to a stop, all but carrying Aunt Dianne down the steps. When it came to her turn, Madeline ignored him and got down on her own. *Let him see that I am not some helpless woman.* Gregory only lifted an eyebrow but said nothing. *Smart man.*

Madeline spied the seamstress's shop. “Lord Blithely, I see the shop from here. Thank you for your assistance. My aunt and I shall be fine from this point.”

Not waiting for an answer, she took her aunt's arm and moved towards the place as fast as her aunt's ankle allowed. Madeline opened the door, hearing a bell ding! above her head. A portly woman came out of nowhere, sizing them up with her stare.

“Yes? How may I help you?”

“We've come to speak with Mrs Danbridge about a gown for an upcoming ball,” Madeline explained.

“I am Mrs Danbridge, but I'm afraid I cannot help you. I have far too many orders to take one on at this point in the Season.”

Madeline's spirits fell. “Is there absolutely no way to help me? A friend told me that you were the best seamstress in London. Money is no hindrance. I'm willing to pay double.”

The woman's eyes flickered at the mention of money, but she still shook her head. “I'm afraid there's nothing I can do.”

“Surely, you do not mean that?” asked Gregory, walking into the shop.

Madeline whipped around, first wondering how he managed to enter the shop without the bell ringing, and secondly, what he was still doing here. He was supposed to have left!

“Lord Blithely!” the woman exclaimed. “How lovely to see you again.

I trust you're well?"

"I would be better if you would help Miss Spencer in her time of need, my dear Mrs Danbridge," he said with the smoothness of a fox.

Gregory came forward, dropping a light kiss on the woman's bare hand. Mrs Danbridge's cheeks flamed with colour, as her hand went to her well-sized bosom.

"Still the charming scoundrel you've always been, I see," the woman lightly scolded.

"What can I say?" Gregory smiled. "You bring out the best in me, my dear woman. So, what do you say? Will you help them? It's just one dress, Mrs Danbridge. Those magical hands are capable of wondrous things, surely you can fit in one more gown?"

Madeline had never seen Gregory act this charming, and frankly, it was amazing to watch. *He certainly knows how to speak to women.* Why did that annoy her?

"Oh, very well!" the woman agreed. "I'll take on one last gown, but nothing more, you hear me?"

Madeline couldn't believe her ears. "You'll make my dress?"

"That's what I said, didn't I?" the woman snapped. "You should thank Lord Blithely. He always has a way of making women do the complete

opposite of what they are resolved to do. Come along, Miss Spencer. We might as well have your measurements taken, and what you've envisioned for the gown.”

Madeline begrudgingly turned to Gregory, not at all surprised when she saw a hint of smugness on his face.

“Thank you, Lord Blithely. You've undoubtedly come to my rescue.”

Gregory nodded once. “No need to thank me, Miss Spencer. Camilla would have my head if I did not help you.”

Madeline wondered at that as she followed Mrs Danbridge to a back room. *Why would he help me when he clearly dislikes me?* It made no sense. Was he anxious about what his cousin might say? She didn't know.

As the seamstress took measurements and discussed the colour, style, length, and embellishment of the gown, Madeline could hear her aunt speaking to Gregory. *Why hasn't he left yet? Does he think I'll need his help again?*

“Be back in three days for your first fitting, Miss Spencer,” said Mrs Danbridge. “This concludes our first meeting.”

Madeline thanked her, adjusting her clothes and hair before making her way to the front room where Aunt Dianne and Gregory were chatting as though they were good friends. Gregory was the first to look up, and Madeline suddenly felt shy.

“Good, you're done, Miss Spencer,” he said. “I was just telling your aunt of a lovely teashop not too far from here.”

“Oh? But we do not have time for tea, right now. Thank you once again, Lord Blithely,” she said and turned to her aunt. “Shall we, Aunt?”

“Oh, dear, the teashop sounds lovely,” her aunt all but whined. “We simply must go.”

“But, Aunt-”

“I feel parched, dear,” Aunt Dianne insisted. “Lord Blithely has kindly assisted us today. How can we turn down his offer to accompany us to the teashop?”

Madeline could see there was no changing her aunt's mind. “Very well, tea it is.”

First, the ride to the seamstress, then convincing Mrs Danbridge to take on another client, and now tea. What is he up to?

Chapter 11

Gregory wanted to knock some sense into himself, but all he could do was smile and give polite nods as Mrs Abbot spoke to him. What sort of crazed moment had made him decide to invite the women to tea? *I knew I was asking for trouble when I agreed to take them to Mrs Danbridge. I should have said I had a necessary appointment to attend to and left Camilla's house.*

When Madeline had insisted that they take their own carriage and follow behind him, Gregory hadn't liked that. It had been the perfect solution so he would not have to feel responsible for getting them home, but he had insisted they all take his carriage like some diddling fool.

"That's what happens when I don't listen to common sense," he grumbled.

Realising he had said that out loud, Gregory looked at Mrs Abbot and her charge, relieved to see they had heard nothing.

So, what had made him stand by the carriage once they had jumped off? It was apparent Madeline had fully intended to find her own transport home, giving him a way out. *I should have taken it, but I didn't.* Instead, he had found himself making his way into the seamstress's shop and overheard the woman tell Madeline that she could do nothing to help her.

Gregory's protectiveness had been stirred, and he had jumped to the rescue. He didn't want to see Madeline disappointed. *Why should I care? She's merely a loud creature who spits venomous lies that threaten to*

undo an old man. But he did care, and that worried him.

"Have you lived in London all your life, Lord Blithely?" asked Mrs Abbot.

"Not at all, Mrs Abbot. My family and I lived in the countryside for much of my life. After my father passed on, I found it easier to run his businesses from London. I first moved, and later my mother and sisters followed."

"I cannot imagine living in such a busy town day in and day out, Lord Blithely," the woman commented. "What do you say, Maddy?"

Madeline looked up at the mention of her name, her eyes questioning. Was she so lost in her thoughts that she had failed to hear her aunt's question? Madeline had remained unnaturally quiet throughout the carriage ride, further grating upon his nerves. *Why won't she just speak to me as she talks to others? Madeline always has a smile or a laugh for other people, but never for me.* Was it wrong of him to want to be treated as she did others? *After all, I'm not the one in the wrong; she is.*

"I beg your pardon, Aunt?" Madeline finally said. "I'm afraid I did not catch your question."

Mrs Abbot patted the young woman's cheek. "Still worried about your gown, dear? I'm sure everything will work out perfectly well, thanks to Lord Blithely. He softened Mrs Danbridge until she was nothing but pudding in his hands, and now she has agreed to make a beautiful dress. You must tell me what you have decided over tea."

“Yes, Aunt.”

Madeline's gaze flickered to him, but when she met his eyes, she quickly looked away and focused on her hands. *Why won't you speak to me? And why do you interest me like no other woman has?* Gregory was tired of this need driving him to gain Madeline's attention, to have her look at him and speak to him as she did with others. Gregory had obviously taken leave of his senses, but he was forging ahead with this ridiculous intention to have Madeline like him. *Pathetic*. No one could be any more disgusted in themselves than he was at that moment.

“The teashop we're going to is one of the oldest in London,” he offered, hoping it would interest her. “Many famous people have passed through its doors in the last few centuries.”

Gregory watched Madeline incline her head towards him as though she were listening. *Well, I suppose that's something.*

“Really?” said Mrs Abbot. “How marvellous. My niece loves going into places steeped in history. Don't you, my dear?”

“Yes, Aunt.”

Is that all she was going to say? “They have a guest book with signatures from people of royalty, to world-renowned composers and musicians, and even authors.”

“I imagine many people go to the teashop to see the book,” said the older woman.

“They try to, but it's locked away. Some years ago, they had a break-in where the thieves tried to steal the book likely in the hopes of selling it. Fortunately, someone had been in the shop at the time and chased the thieves away with a sword. Later, when the thieves were caught, they said they were chased away by a ghost wielding a sword. It had just been one of the bakers covered in flour.”

Mrs Abbot roared with laughter. “How positively comical that must have been to watch!”

Gregory watched a hint of a smile cross Madeline's lips. *Does she find the story amusing?* A wave of warm feelings briefly washed over him, coming to a halt when he realised how a wrong this was. Had he forgotten the lie she had told the Duke? *I should be trying to find a way to get her out of England and far from the Duke. Instead, I'm hoping for a smile or kind word from her.* The Duke had continued to ask questions about the woman, although Gregory had told him to forget about her and pretend he had never met her. *I seem to be only encouraging him to wonder more about Madeline by humouring his questions.*

Each time Gregory visited the old man, the Duke would ask at least one question about Madeline. *First, it was whether I had kicked her out of the house. Obviously, I did no such thing and told him as much.* That had appeared to make the Duke happier than Gregory thought wise. *I understand that she is a single woman in a foreign country, but she is not without help. The woman came with an entire entourage, for goodness' sake! I still do not understand why she brought those ridiculous animals with her.*

At least Madeline had been faithful to her word, and her beasts had not turned his house into a playground. The animals were relatively well-behaved for a large dog, monkey, and parrot. *The poor creatures have the oddest names.* What had she called them again? *Ah, Lemony, Hippocrates, and Tally. Tally I can understand, but why name a monkey*

and a dog Lemony and Hippocrates?

“You look confused, Lord Blithely,” Mrs Abbot commented.

“I was merely thinking, that's all. Do you have any pets, Mrs Abbot?”

The woman nodded with a smile. "I have a duck my niece rescued from hunters last fall. She's a rather cute thing and follows me everywhere. Madeline told me to bring her with, but I was worried she might get out during the voyage and jump into the sea, so she's with the other ducks in the sanctuary back home."

A duck? The animal was meant to be eaten, not kept as a pet! Gregory had expected the woman to tell him about a dog or cat, but a duck? *Perhaps crazy runs in the family.*

“I see,” was all he was willing to say.

Gregory already knew about the many animals Madeline kept in her sanctuary from the night she had eaten dinner in his home. He had spoken about it to the Duke in the hopes he would see how such a woman could never be his daughter, but the man had smiled and said Madeline reminded him of his late wife. Recently, the man had begun asking more questions, particularly about what she got up to weekly. How was he to know that? *I don't follow the woman around like some lovesick puppy.*

Gregory did begrudgingly inform the man about Madeline's dinner party, and its success. The Duke had seemed pleased about that which only made Gregory worried. *I suspect he wants to believe Madeline is his*

daughter, and if that is the case, the man is setting himself up for disappointment. The Duke had even asked if Miss Spencer had everything she needed as though he were willing to give her money. *I put my foot down on that!*

What if the man became invested in Madeline, only to find out that she was indeed an imposter? It was only a matter of time until Gregory was proven right, and he could protect the Duke from the American woman. *I have seen what disappointment does to the Duke, and I will not have it happen again.*

The teashop was thankfully not full when Gregory led Madeline and her aunt to his usual spot. It was around lunchtime that it began to fill up, but hopefully, they would be out by then. Gregory hated crowded places and tended to avoid London at its peak whenever he could. Of course, that wasn't possible every time as he had his publishing house to see to, and he often had to drive through the bustling streets for business.

“Allow me to pull up your chairs for you,” Gregory offered.

“How kind of you, Lord Blithely,” said Mrs Abbot. “You're a true gentleman.”

I wish you would tell that to your niece. Madeline seemed intent on disliking him when she was in the wrong. *I have been nothing but pleasant to her.*

Madeline ignored his offer and pulled up her own chair beside her aunt, ensuring he would need to sit opposite them. For just one moment, Gregory had hoped they would sit on the same side of the round table, but he should have known that would be impossible. Madeline wanted nothing to do with him and only suffered his

presence because she didn't want to appear rude. *At least I know she had a good upbringing, although I wish they would have taught her that lying is wrong.*

"May I order for us?" he asked. "I know all the best teas, pastries, and savouries on the menu."

"Why, of course, Lord Blithely," Mrs Abbot agreed. "Surprise us. Give my niece and I the full English experience, and perhaps we might even be able to see this famous guest book."

"I will certainly do my best."

Gregory felt pressure to please the women, so he ordered two types of tea, cold meat, fruit, sandwiches, mini cakes, and scones.

"There are only three of us," Madeline commented drily. "How will we possibly finish all you have ordered?"

Oh, so now she speaks? "There is no need to eat everything, Miss Spencer. I only wished you to have the opportunity to try everything."

"He's done a good thing, dear," her aunt insisted. "Let's enjoy this tea and not worry about excess."

Madeline raised her dark eyebrows. "I find that difficult to do when I noticed a few beggars on the street a while ago."

Did she have to make him feel bad? "We can ask the servants to put the leftovers in a basket and hand it to the beggars on our way back. Would that please you?"

"It's not about pleasing me, Lord Blithely," Madeline bit back. "It's about helping the poor, and being mindful of unnecessary excess, especially when it comes to food."

"Noted, Miss Spencer. I shall endeavour to do just that from this moment on. Would you rather I call the servant back and cancel most of our order?"

Madeline gave a light snort. "Now, that would be ridiculous considering the order has already gone to the cook. As Aunt Dianne said, let's enjoy what we can."

She openly criticises me, but cannot thank me with her usual friendliness for all the help I provided today. I'm starting to believe that I shall never do anything of worth in her books. Madeline had already labelled him as a 'persona non grata'.

Their refreshments arrived sometime later, filling up their table. Gregory noticed Madeline's eyes light up at the chocolate pastries, and realised the woman had a penchant for chocolate.

"The teashop makes the most glorious chocolate drink with cocoa they specially order from a merchant who deals with exotic spices and fruits."

“A chocolate drink?” Madeline asked with interest. “I wonder if it's similar to the one we drink back home.”

“I could call a servant back and order it for you,” he eagerly offered.

“Oh no, Lord Blithely,” Madeline refused. “I couldn't possibly stomach a chocolate drink atop all this food. Perhaps Aunt and I will come here another day and have it.”

Well, that told him. “Of course, that is best. Please, eat.”

“Dear, would you do the honours of pouring the tea for us?” Mrs Abbot asked.

Gregory wondered if Madeline would say no, but she nodded and stood up. “Lord Blithely, how many sugars do you take?”

“Two, Miss Spencer, and a drop of milk. Thank you.”

Madeline prepared his tea expertly, not making a noise when she stirred the sugar and milk into the tea. She handed it to him, keeping her hands well away from him. Gregory nodded his thanks, but Madeline was already onto the next cup, adding four sugars and a generous pour of milk for her aunt. He wanted to see how she would prepare her own and was surprised to see her put one lemon slice into her tea.

"No sugar or milk, Miss Spencer?" he asked.

"I prefer plain tea with a hint of tartness with my chocolate pastries, my lord. Other than that, I take half a sugar and a drop of milk."

Even the way she prepared her tea was interesting to Gregory. "Do you find milky tea to be a hindrance to the flavour of the chocolate?"

Madeline frowned ever so slightly. "I've never thought about it in that way. Mama always insisted that chocolate needed something light to go with it, or it would upset your stomach. I don't know how true that is, and I've never bothered to find out."

"I forgot that about your mother, dear," said Mrs Abbot. "She always had so many rules when it came to food. Not that she didn't enjoy it, because she did, but she would come up with the oddest combinations and swear by them. She once offered me ginger tea and honey when I complained of a cough that scratched at my throat. I found the combination absolutely vile, but it helped. She said an Indian guru she once met in England gave her the recipe."

Gregory stilled. Did Mrs Abbot just say Madeline's mother was once in England? A vague memory of Madeline telling his mother and sister that she had spent the first three years of her life in England unsettled him. Charlotte had been three when the Duchess took her away. *No, it's either they are lying, or it's mere coincidence. There is simply no chance of Madeline being Lady Russell.* Gregory had it on good report that both child and mother had perished at sea.

"Miss Spencer!" exclaimed a familiar voice. "How wonderful to see you here. It must be fate."

“Or you saw her walking in here,” another familiar voice snickered.

Gregory pinched the bridge of his nose, inwardly sighing. Of all the people to be here, it had to be Lord Crawley and Lord Finney.

Madeline's lips spread into a broad smile. “How are you?” she asked.

Now she smiles. Gregory turned a scowling face to the men, noticing how they hardly paid him any attention. Their eyes were solely on Madeline.

“Much better now that we've seen you,” said Finney. “Had we any idea that you would be out and about, we would have invited you to our table. We booked it ahead of time to accommodate our party.”

“Oh? How many of you are there?” Madeline asked, evidently interested.

If she thinks she will leave me to join these humdrum knuckleheads, she has another thing coming. Gregory will remind her of propriety if need be. One did not leave the audience of one to go to another.

“Seven in total,” Crawley answered. “Ah, Lord Blithely, I didn't see you there.”

“I suppose you didn't see me either, young man,” said Mrs Abbot.

Gregory could have kissed her. The older woman looked the men up and down, her lips pursed.

“That's impossible, Mrs Abbot,” crooned Finney. “We were simply saving the best for last.”

“Well, we're just about having our tea,” said Mrs Abbot. “And we wouldn't want to keep you from your own party.”

The woman had just dismissed them with flair, and the men knew it. They departed, but not without a promise to call on Madeline tomorrow. She was still smiling from the interaction, but as soon as she turned to him, her smile died. *That certainly does not lift a man's confidence.*

Several more people came past their table, all eager to speak with Madeline and plan all sorts of parties and events to meet each other. Gregory was merely stuffing his face with savouries and drinking tea after tea while the exchanges took place, covertly sending dark glances in the way of the intruders. *I suppose she has become the Ton's new darling. Who would have thought it? She has charmed the lot of them, and I'm tired of being side-lined.* Gregory had had enough, and before anyone else could come to their table, he slapped his napkin down a little harder than he wanted to, surprising the women.

“My apologies, ladies,” he began. “Unfortunately, I must get back to some business matters. Do you think we could go now? And I will not hear of you taking a coach to get home. I brought you here, and I shall take you home.”

"I'm ready to go, Lord Blithely," said Mrs Abbot. "All our visitors have made me rather sleepy, and I could do with an afternoon nap before dinner."

"Miss Spencer, do you mind if we leave now?"

"Of course, we can leave," she answered, smiling stiffly. "You must get back to business."

I do not think she likes the idea of leaving her friends, but I've passed the point of caring. He helped Mrs Abbot to her feet, placing her walking stick in her hand. Madeline appeared at her aunt's side, forcing him away. Did she not want him to help her aunt? Evidently so. Inwardly sighing, Gregory let them walk ahead, expecting another quiet and tense ride home.

The first ten minutes in the carriage were absolute silence, but Madeline surprised Gregory when she asked him about his line of work. It had been unexpected, but she appeared interested.

"I do a lot of things, Miss Spencer. I run our family businesses, take care of the Duke's estate, and I run a newspaper agency that also publishes books, magazines, and the sort."

"Publishing, you say?"

"Yes. I'm part of a circulating library that rents to readers of modest means, and I recently started a library subscription which has led to a wider readership than I initially imagined."

“Do you have apprentices to assist you with printing and delivery? What about newsgathering and reporting? I assume you do your own editing, or do you have someone to do it?”

Gregory was pleasantly surprised by Madeline's interest and knowledge of the publishing world. Since it was predominately a man's business field, women didn't tend to concern themselves with it.

"I have an excellent assistant who sees to delivery and printing, as well as an editor. She's a stickler for accuracy, and I trust her. As far as the newsgathering goes, I sometimes act as a reporter, or I pay others for information."

The two continued to speak about the publishing world while Mrs Abbot dozed off, hardly aware of the time passing. They didn't realise they had arrived at the townhouse until the driver stepped down and opened the door for them. Gregory walked the women to the door, unwilling to end his time with Madeline, but he couldn't ask to come in when he had stated he had some business to attend to. On his way back home, Gregory found he had a new respect for Madeline.

“I suppose she cannot be as terrible as I believed.”

The matter still stood that she was trying to pretend to be someone she clearly was not. Gregory had never felt more torn.

Chapter 12

Madeline still found herself thinking about her conversation with Gregory later that evening. As Rebecca turned down the bed, placing some dried lavender under her pillow, Madeline sat at her vanity table, looking into her mirror but seeing nothing. She was supposed to be brushing her thick and wavy dark hair, but the brush lay forgotten in her hand.

“The bed is ready,” Rebecca announced.

“Mhm.”

The handmaiden's reflection appeared in the mirror, her gaze speculative and probing. “What happened today? You've not been yourself since Lord Blithely brought you home. To tell the truth, I was surprised when the carriage arrived home without you, and not a word of explanation. I assumed you were still with Mrs Winters, but then I saw you arrive with the very man you claim to despise.”

Did she despise Gregory? I suppose I do, or at least I thought I did. Today has been a revelation of sorts, and he has shown another side of himself, but I cannot allow that to cloud my judgement.

“I was surprised as well. Camilla suggested Lord Blithely take us to the seamstress she recommended. He helped convince the woman to accept another client, and he invited us to tea. I do not know what to make of him.”

Suppose he was getting closer to her to find out some damning information? *He can look as hard as he wants, I have nothing to hide.* Perhaps Madeline should allow him to draw closer so he can see for himself that she wasn't lying about being the Duke's long-lost daughter.

“How odd,” said Rebecca. “The man undoubtedly dislikes you as much as you dislike him, and yet he helped you. Why? Every person has a motive.”

Madeline shrugged. “Who knows? What I was most surprised by is his line of work. Do you know he has a newspaper agency and runs a publishing house? He spoke of circulating libraries and subscriptions, how he gathers the news- he even has a female employee! How many men do you know would willingly hire a woman to work in a male-dominated field?”

Rebecca folded her arms. “Do not tell me you have started to think highly of him? Had he stuck his aristocratic nose out of your business with the Duke, we might be on our way home by now.”

“Oh, I know that, Becca, but I cannot deny that this new aspect to him has interested me. Not once did he put my ideas down as silly or nonsensical. He listened,” she stressed. “Truly listened to me. You know how invested I am in the publishing and literary world, and how I wish to expand my own. Perhaps one day I will no longer have to write as AS Rossouw, but Madeline Spencer.”

“Or Lady Russell,” Rebecca added.

“If I ever prove myself,” said Madeline. “You know, Gregory believed that women would have more of a role in publishing as the times

change, but for now, we will have to fight for it. He shared my exact sentiments.”

“You didn't tell him about your secret pamphlets on slavery, and the women's literature you've written over the years?”

“Of course not,” Madeline exclaimed. “I do not know him well enough to reveal such a secret. I may respect him for his work in the field, but I'm not such a fool. He knows that I do some work in the publishing field and seemed rather encouraging about it. How many men do you know would do that?”

“Certainly not Mr Stratford,” Rebecca laughed. “That man would sooner see you at home round with his babies than out working.”

Madeline rolled her eyes. “Do not remind me of the fool. Did he come today?”

The man had been showing up to the house nearly every day to see her to 'talk some sense' into her. Most of the time, the servants would tell him that she wasn't home, but whenever Aunt Dianne knew of his visit, she would insist he come inside.

“He did,” Rebecca admitted. “But I could truthfully say you were not around. As always, he asked me to tell you he called.”

“Did he leave any tokens of his love?”

“Tulips I placed in the kitchen. They are rather beautiful, but I know you prefer peonies.”

“As did Mama, but even if Alexander bought me peonies, I still wouldn't accept them. It would give him ideas.”

“Well, you've undoubtedly had an eventful day, but now it's time for bed,” Rebecca ordered. “Why don't I brush your hair? You haven't done such a good job this evening.”

Madeline laughed. “You just want to get me into bed so you can go down to the kitchen to hear the latest gossip. I always tell you that you don't have to wait for me to get into bed, Becca.”

“Ha! First, you accuse me of being lazy, and now I shouldn't do my work,” Rebecca complained.

Shaking her head, Madeline smiled. “Fine, brush my hair, watch me get into bed, and then go. Does that make you happy?”

Rebecca held out her hand. “Brush, please.”

Madeline handed it to her, expecting a hard tug of her hair, but the woman was gentle as always. *All bark and no bite, just like her mother.* Rebecca's soothing strokes lulled Madeline into a calm state, but she still had her mind on Gregory. *He was kind today, more than I believed possible for a man who considers me a liar.* What was she supposed to think about this? *I haven't the foggiest.*

For the second time since coming to England, Madeline found herself going to see the Duke. However, this time around, he had been the one to invite her without any prompting from her.

“Why do you suppose the Duke wants to see you, dear?” asked Aunt Dianne.

“Your guess is as good as mine, Aunt. Lord Blithely all but kicked us out of the house last time, and I assumed the situation done and dusted until I had proof.”

Madeline had finally explained to her aunt what happened the day Gregory told them to leave the house. Aunt Dianne had been outraged that anyone would doubt her niece's word, especially when it was evident that Madeline was the Duke's daughter. Aunt Dianne was fully aware of the story involving her mother's escape from England, and marrying another man, but the family had buried it for Madeline's sake. Aunt Dianne had wanted to give Lord Blithely a talking to, but Madeline had cautioned her against it. It would not do for visiting Americans to cause a raucous and undo everything Madeline had achieved thus far.

“I hope Lord Blithely isn't around today,” said her aunt darkly. “I cannot believe I was so nice to him the other day. I wish you had told me about this matter sooner.”

“That's precisely why I didn't tell you, Aunt. I didn't want you to treat him differently. Even if he is with the Duke today, we will still act polite. There's no reason to resort to hurling words even if he is rude.”

Aunt Dianne sighed. “Very well. I just hope the Duke can think for himself. Oh look, we've arrived.”

Madeline felt her belly clench tight. What could the Duke want to see her about? The suspense was killing her. *The sooner we get inside, the sooner we'll know.*

The estate's footman approached the carriage, opening the door. "Good day, Miss Spencer, Mrs Abbot."

We're clearly expected. "Good day," Madeline returned.

The footman assisted Aunt Dianne down as though he were aware of her injured ankle, which meant Gregory had to have told the Duke about it. *He must be reporting back to him about everything I do.* Madeline was next, and when she looked up, the butler they had met the last time appeared out of seemingly nowhere.

"Good day, Mrs Abbot, Miss Spencer. How lovely to see you again. Would you come this way?"

Madeline and her aunt followed the man inside, but not to the room she had been in the last time. Madeline felt somewhat disappointed because she wanted to sit in the chair she had taken the last time. Something about it had been so familiar, but she couldn't decide why.

The butler took them to an open door, knocking once. "Your Grace, Miss Spencer and Mrs Abbot."

When Madeline walked in, she immediately saw Gregory. She almost

smiled but caught herself on time.

“This man is not my friend,” she told herself, her lips hardly moving. The sooner I realise this, the better.”

The Viscount was probably here as a bodyguard and would be ready to kick them out again if they put a foot out of place.

Madeline's attention was soon taken by the Duke who stood up, his face welcoming as he smiled.

“Miss Spencer, Mrs Abbot, thank you for coming to see me today at such short notice. I wasn't sure if you would wish to come after what happened the last time.”

The man raised his eyebrows at Gregory who merely gave a minute shrug of his shoulders as if to say 'what?'

"To tell the truth, Your Grace, we were surprised when we received the invitation, and we were curious about what you would wish to see us about."

“We can get to that later,” the man said. “Why don't you take a seat? Refreshments should be on their way.”

Aunt Dianne kept close to Madeline's side, sitting on a two-seater sofa. The Duke returned to his chair, sitting down with a sigh.

"Gregory told me about your injury, Mrs Abbot. Would you like my physician to take a look at it?" the Duke offered. "He is good with that sort of thing."

"No, thank you, Your Grace," said Aunt Dianne stiffly. "My niece has seen to everything. She knows how to take care of her family."

The Duke nodded. "That's good. So, how do you like England thus far, Miss Spencer? It must be quite different from what you're accustomed to."

Were they going to dance around the issue of what happened the last time she was here? It would appear so. Madeline wondered if the Duke had any suspicions that she was his daughter, but only time would tell.

"England is different, Your Grace, but I'm getting along just fine. I've been received quite well, and I've made a friend or two."

The Duke smiled. "Gregory told me you've made a good impression on the *Ton*. How did you describe it, Gregory? Ah, you've become the *Ton's* darling."

Gregory had continued to say nothing, only nodding along to whatever the Duke said, but Madeline could see he was keeping an eye on her. She wanted to tell him that she wasn't the one who invited herself, but the Duke had. He had no right to look at her as though she were some criminal bent on wreaking havoc. *I understand he is concerned about the Duke, but he should calm down and trust that the Duke knows what he's doing.* Even if she didn't.

“Other people are able to tell that my niece is a wonderful person,” said Aunt Dianne. “She doesn't have to pretend to be someone else to be liked or accepted.”

Madeline glanced sharply at her aunt, raising her eyebrows in warning. *I hope Aunt Dianne's temper doesn't get the best of her. She's usually so mild, but whenever anyone or anything threatens her family, a lioness awakens.*

“She's a novelty, Mrs Abbot,” Gregory said. “The *Ton* has always been partial to 'different'. Soon enough, they'll grow tired of the new toy and move on.”

Madeline heard her aunt's quiet sharp intake of breath. Had Gregory spoken intending to be rude, or was he merely stating facts?

“No one grows tired of my niece, Lord Blithely,” Aunt Dianne snapped coolly. “Rather, she grows bored of people. Thankfully, we'll be returning home as soon as we've concluded whatever we've come to do here.”

“When will you be returning?” the Duke asked with concern.

Why should it matter to him, unless he was asking because he wanted her to leave? *I'll bet Gregory wishes to see the back of me.*

“It depends on whether or not I complete what I set out to do,”

Madeline answered.

Silence. Everyone knew what she was talking about, but no one wished to come out and say what was on their minds. The Duke finally broke the silence, putting more cheer into his voice than anyone felt.

“You have an animal sanctuary back home, I believe. I find that rather interesting, Miss Spencer.”

"It's just a home for animals who have been abandoned or injured by hunters, Your Grace. Others have lost their mothers, and need protection from predators, and others I just picked up on the side of the road."

"And you're not at all afraid of the more dangerous ones? You've got wolves and bears if I'm not mistaken."

Madeline shook her head. "It's not fear you need to have, but respect. If you show enough love, they return it. The bear cubs I raised keep the wild ones in check, the same goes for the wolves."

The Duke's eyes were wide in astonishment. "It takes one courageous person to deal with such animals, Miss Spencer."

“Or a foolish one,” Gregory muttered.

Everyone went silent as they looked at him. They had all heard what

he said. Gregory's eyes widened, looking from person to person. Nothing was said because the refreshments were brought in and set before them, but Gregory tried to explain himself as soon as the servants left.

“What I meant to say was-” he began.

"There's nothing foolish about taking care of animals, Lord Blithely," Madeline interrupted. "It's bad enough that we forcefully take much of their habitat without a thought to them, or kill them for sport. As humans, we are responsible for taking care of the world we live in and everything in it. If I can make the slightest difference in the lives of a few animals, then I've done my duty."

“I commend you for that,” the Duke added soothingly. “I do not think Gregory meant to call you a fool, did you, Gregory?”

The Viscount sighed. “No, I did not. My apologies, Miss Spencer.”

Madeline wanted to say 'not accepted' and let him deal with that, but that wouldn't be courteous, would it?

“Apology accepted, my lord,” she offered graciously.

“Does this love to do good extend to people as well?” the Duke asked. “I have an orphanage and run two charities to help the poor. Perhaps you can be of help to guide me in making their lives better.”

Madeline didn't know this about the Duke. Did this happen before or after her mother left him? Her mother had never mentioned the Duke's charitable work in her diary.

"I run a soup kitchen and organise places for the poor to stay. My manservant, Jeremiah, also has a soft spot for helping the needy, so he assists me a lot."

"Jeremiah would be the big black man I've heard so much about, yes?" the Duke questioned. "People appear fascinated by him, and I myself would love to see him."

Madeline's brow puckered. "He's not some circus sideshow, Your Grace, but a human being. Surely you're not a white supremacist who believes he is better than others?"

"Not at all!" the man denied. "I'm merely interested, my dear. I once knew a Moor when I travelled the continent, and he was a good chap. Deeply religious fellow. Is your manservant the same?"

"Jeremiah is kind, intelligent, and not at all religious, but he fears God. He is a better man than any other I've met, including those of my own kind."

"By that, you mean white, Miss Spencer?" asked Gregory.

Madeline was beginning to grow tired of his side remarks. "Was I not clear enough, my lord?"

To their surprise, the Duke roared with laughter. "I think it best you watch yourself, Gregory. Miss Spencer does not take kindly to your words."

Gregory turned beet red. "I'm merely asking questions, Your Grace. I did not mean to offend Miss Spencer."

"Perhaps you should tell her that," the Duke suggested.

"There's no need, Your Grace," Madeline insisted with a little smile. "Obviously, Lord Blithely cannot help himself."

The Duke chuckled. "You remind me of my late wife, Miss Spencer. She had a way of letting you know precisely how she felt without saying much."

Which wife was he talking about? The first or second? *Although he does sound like he's describing Mama.*

"Do you favour your mother in appearance, Miss Spencer?" the man asked.

Why is he asking a question he already knows the answer to? Madeline didn't know what to say.

"She's the spitting image of her, Your Grace," Aunt Dianne replied simply.

Sadness entered the Duke's eyes. "I thought as much. Do you mind if I leave you, ladies? I suddenly feel the need to lie down."

Gregory immediately stood up, concern etched on his face. "Are you well, Your Grace? Should I call the physician?"

The Duke waved his hand. "No, no, I'm perfectly well, young man. I only need to lie down, but you stay here and take care of my guests."

"But, Your Grace," the man objected.

"Gregory, please."

The Viscount sighed. "Yes, of course."

The Duke stood up. "Thank you for coming today, Miss Spencer, Mrs Abbot. You've brought some excitement into this old fellow's life. Please, help yourself to the refreshments. I hope to see you again."

Madeline could tell the last sentence had been directed at her. "Thank you, Your Grace."

The man looked at her for the longest while before slowly moving to the door and disappearing around the bend. She sensed the longing in him, the need for her claim to be valid. *I wish it didn't have to be so*

difficult to prove I'm your daughter.

Chapter 13

Gregory watched the man he respected leave the room, noting his stooped shoulders and shuffling feet. *Why did he have to ask about Madeline's mother?* It was as though the man couldn't help himself. *I warned him to steer clear of these sorts of questions, but he refused to listen.* Gregory had spoken to the Duke before Madeline and Mrs Abbot's arrival.

The Duke had requested his presence today but gave no clue in his note what it was about. Gregory had assumed it had something to do with the estate or something, but the Duke revealed his plan the moment Gregory sat down. *He did it behind my back after telling him never to contact Miss Spencer until we knew for sure who she was.* The Duke had likely planned it this way to ensure Gregory could do nothing about it. *The sneaky old fellow.*

"You don't have to entertain us, my lord," said Madeline. "I think it best we leave."

It would be so easy to say yes, and have the women leave. He just had to make up an excuse to the Duke about why they had to go so suddenly. However, Gregory wanted Madeline to stay a little while longer. To make matters worse it had nothing to do with the Duke; but himself.

"The Duke would take offence at that, Miss Spencer," Gregory reasoned. "Please stay and have the refreshments provided. I mentioned that you liked chocolate pastries, so the Duke made sure to include them today. The cook also does a wonderful hot chocolate, and if you have the time, she can quickly make one for you. I believe it's just as good as the one from the teashop."

Madeline looked to her aunt, and some sort of unspoken communication must have passed between the two women because she eventually turned to him and nodded.

“We'll have what has been provided, my lord,” she said. “There's no need to put the cook to any trouble.”

Gregory didn't realise he had been holding his breath until she spoke. He silently let the breath whoosh out of him.

“It wouldn't be any trouble, but perhaps another time.”

Madeline raised her eyebrows at that. What was he saying? Another time? *A slip of the tongue. This time I'm going to have the Duke give me his word that he'll never be this sneaky again.*

The room grew quiet as Madeline wordlessly made the teas and served him and her aunt. Gregory took one sip of his tea and smiled. *She remembered.* Somehow, the tea even tasted better than he or anyone else could have made it. *I wish we knew each other under different circumstances. Perhaps we might have been friends of sorts.* However, Gregory had to keep his head in the situation. The Duke was clearly growing attached to the idea that Madeline was his daughter, and once the man's mind fully latched onto the notion, it would be difficult to dissuade him.

“Are you not eating anything, Lord Blithely?” Mrs Abbot asked. “Or have you poisoned the food to get rid of us once and for all? I know you do not like my niece, and refuse to believe she is the Duke's daughter. Only a fool would deny what is so obvious. She looks just

like Hyacinth!"

"Miss Spencer's mother was called Francesca, not Hyacinth, Mrs Abbot," Gregory argued. "And I would never do anything to endanger someone's life. If it makes you feel any better, I'll eat something."

Gregory stretched for the nearest sandwich, throwing it into his mouth in one go.

"That doesn't mean a thing, young man," the woman insisted. "You could have strategically placed the non-poisonous food near you, and the poisonous eats on our side."

"Aunt, don't be ridiculous," said Madeline, calmly. "I'm sure Lord Blithely is not a murderer."

Gregory cast her a thankful look, but the woman looked away, not acknowledging him at all.

"We don't know anything at this point, dear," her aunt responded. "It's evident to us all that Lord Blithely wants you out of the Duke's life, and since I know everything as well, he wants me gone as well. I wouldn't be surprised if he's prepared two graves for us somewhere in the woods."

Madeline covered her eyes, but when her shoulders began to shake, Gregory grew alarmed. He thought to get up and see what the matter was when he heard a giggle. She was laughing! *I'm glad she finds this amusing. I've never been accused of trying to kill anyone before.*

Seconds later, the young woman threw her head back, her laughter filling the room. Tears coursed down her cheeks and neck, disappearing into her white dress.

“Oh, Aunt Dianne!” Madeline chuckled. “I warned you to stop reading those mystery novels. Do you recall what happened last Christmas?”

What happened last Christmas? Gregory wanted to ask, but he felt this wasn't the time. *Perhaps another time.*

Mrs Abbot looked away, scratching the side of her neck. “I don't know what you're talking about, dear. Anyway, perhaps Lord Blithely isn't trying to kill us, but I still don't trust him.”

“I'll eat anything you put on my plate if that makes you feel secure, Mrs Abbot,” Gregory offered, struggling not to laugh himself.

Madeline's laughter was infectious and lifted one's spirits. *This is laughter I'll never grow tired of listening to.*

“Anything?” the older woman repeated.

“Anything,” Gregory affirmed.

“Aunt...” Madeline warned, still giggling.

“What, dear? I'm putting the man to the test. Wouldn't you like to be absolutely certain he has no designs on ending our lives? I, for one, would just like to err on the side of caution.”

“Oh, goodness, Aunt,” Madeline sighed. “Very well, but don't try to kill the man with food.”

That was all the woman needed to hear. She stood up, taking the biggest plate she could find and started loading it with three of each savoury and sweet treat. Gregory's eyes bulged at the pile of food, his stomach-turning. *She's still adding to it!*

“Is that all necessary?” he asked weakly.

The woman shrugged. “You could have hidden poison in any one of these treats, Lord Blithely. Besides, you're a strapping young man who can handle this food, and then some. Here.”

Mrs Abbot handed the plate to him, her eyes narrowed. Gregory took it without further question, swallowing hard. He had already eaten a full meal before coming to the Duke's estate, but now he wished he hadn't. *How on earth am I supposed to finish this?*

“Can I at least eat half of each one? That should suffice to prove there is no poison.”

Mrs Abbot nodded. “Half is fine. Go ahead, start.”

Gregory looked pleadingly at Madeline, but she lifted a shoulder in indifference. Perhaps, she too wanted to see him suffer a little. *So much for her help.* Starting with the pastries, he slowly bit into each one, stopping once he got halfway. Gregory could feel his stomach stretching, and had a feeling it was reaching its full capacity. *I'm not going to make it.* Did people die from overeating?

"I think that's enough, Aunt," said Madeline. "Lord Blithely has proven himself enough. Put the plate away, my lord, and get some water. Preferably cool water."

Gregory had never been so grateful to anyone as he was right now. "Thank you, Miss Spencer."

Why did he agree to this stupidity, anyway? Who was he trying to please? The word 'Madeline' whispered in his mind, but he pushed it away just as he pushed the plate away and got up with some difficulty. *I might need to roll out of here.*

"If you would excuse me for a moment, ladies. I do need that water."

Gregory walked as upright as he could until he left the room and immediately bent over, holding his belly.

"Well, that was certainly a foolish move on my part. I'll never be able to look at pastries the same way again."

Gregory decided to head straight to the kitchen, not wanting to waste

time by locating a servant and sending them for water. The scullery maids and cooks were surprised to see him and fussed around him, but he shooed them away and asked the housekeeper for water.

“What on earth have you been up to?” the woman asked. “You look green about the gills.”

“Do not ask, Mrs Loveleen. Simply allow me to rest here a moment.”

There was no way he would admit to what he just did. People would assuredly laugh at him! Perhaps not to his face, but they would undoubtedly snicker behind his back. *I foolishly did it for a woman who doesn't like me.* The follies of human minds and feelings.

It was becoming increasingly difficult for Gregory to ignore his growing interest in Madeline. It didn't help that he had done some of his own digging into her life and discovered she had been telling the truth about her life, but it still remained to be seen if she was the Duke's daughter. *Just because she spent the first three years of her life in England does not mean she is Lady Russell, it's a mere coincidence. The fact remains that there is no proof to say that Francesca Spencer was Hyacinth Russell, Duchess of Claverset.*

Neither was there proof that Madeline Spencer was Charlotte Russell. Gregory had to admit he was finding it harder to call her an imposter. *Everything else she has spoken about has been verified, all but that particular part of her life.* Perhaps this was her modus operandi, to seem so genuine in most things just to cover up her lie. *It's all becoming somewhat confusing.* But he had to head back, or the women would think he had run away with his tail between his legs.

Gregory pushed away from the table, glad he was no longer feeling

nauseous. The water seemed to have settled things, but he was not eating until tomorrow. *I need to walk this food off. Perhaps they'll accept a walk in the garden. Or not.* There was no telling what the women would say or do next.

Mrs Abbot had not been too keen about a walk in the garden, but Madeline had jumped at the opportunity to explore the Duke's famous garden. She had apparently heard about it from a guest at her dinner party and wished to see it herself.

"Will your aunt be fine trailing behind us? I wouldn't want to overwork her ankle."

"She has assured me that it is nearly healed," Madeline assured. "And if there is a problem, she'll call me. Besides, I do not intend to spend too much time in the garden."

Madeline had declined to take his arm, but at least she was walking beside him. *I'm growing pathetic by the day. Why should I be happy about having her by my side?*

"Would you mind giving me a brief history, my lord?" she asked. "I hear the garden is special to the Duke."

If she genuinely is Charlotte, she should know why this place is special. Provided that she would have been only three at the time, but the Duke had told him how his wife and daughter had spent a lot of time in this garden.

"It was created by the Duchess soon after her marriage to the Duke. He has kept the garden clean and pruned since her death, keeping

everything as it was the day she died. Every shrub, ornament, flower, and tree are still in the same place."

"I cannot wait to see it!" Madeline exclaimed. "My mother also had a green thumb, and she passed the love of gardening down to me. I assume you mean the first Duchess?"

"No," Gregory answered bluntly. "The second Duchess."

"Mama never said anything about a garden in her diary," she mumbled.

"Excuse me?"

Gregory had heard what Madeline muttered under her breath, but he wanted to know more. What was this diary she was talking about?

"Nothing, my lord. Are we close to the garden?"

"It's just around this hedge."

Madeline began to walk faster, a look of concentration on her face. *Why is she so determined to see the garden?* Gregory hurried after her, nearly bumping into her as he took a corner. Madeline was still; save for her head looking this way and that.

“Miss Spencer?”

“It's simply marvellous,” she breathed. “Mama did all of this?”

Gregory ignored the second part. “It is a beautiful garden. The Duchess had a way with plants, and often assisted others with their gardens.”

“That sounds just like Mama. She had a garden back home, but not as elaborate as this. It was mainly a working garden to feed the less fortunate, but she did have a little area where she grew just flowers. Do you mind if I explore a bit?”

“Be my guest.”

Gregory knew the Duke wouldn't mind Madeline looking through his wife's garden. The man seemed to like the young woman and was well on his way to calling her his daughter. *Despite all my warnings.*

Gregory observed how Madeline gushed over every little thing, even getting to her hands and knees to feel the grass.

“Mama would have been here, wouldn't she? Right here on this grass. She toiled this earth to bring forth all these wonderful plants. Do you know if I spent a lot of time with her in the garden?”

The woman didn't seem to know what she was asking. *Is she insisting I accept she is Lady Russell? Because that is not going to happen.*

“Lady Russell often helped her mother in the garden. Well, as much as a toddler can help her mother.”

“I wish I could remember more,” she said wistfully. “This part of my life was hidden from me for twenty-two years. Not a word was mentioned about England.”

Ha! He wasn't going to buy that, not even for a second. “Do you have your own garden back in America? Not a working one, but with flowers.”

“I do, although not as wonderful as this.” She got to her knees and bent over a rose bush, smelling the flowers. “This smells absolutely divine. What is it about England that plants grow so beautifully?”

Madeline looked so lovely at this moment that he wanted to tell her that she was the beautiful one. The flowers didn't compare to her, not in the slightest. Instead, he cleared his throat, pulling at his necktie.

“It's the rich soil, or perhaps the air around us. Some have likened England to a magical place of folklore and mystery. Perhaps there is magic in these very grounds.”

Madeline's eyes grew wide. “You made that sound wonderful, my lord. No wonder you're in the writing business. Have you written any books?”

Gregory felt his chest puff out just a bit. "Not a book, but several papers on various subjects that interest me. Some have been well-received, while some haven't."

"I know that too well. 'Tis sad newspapers are politically charged, and partial to the times. Taking a step out of the agreed circle is social death to some. Businesses have closed, men have lost their livelihoods, but at least they stood for something. Are you such a man, Lord Blithely?"

Was he? Gregory didn't know, but he liked to think that he always stood up for the truth.

"If you cannot stand for something, you tend to fall for everything," he said. "I stand for truth, Miss Spencer."

Madeline nodded. "I agree. However, even truth seems dictated by the times. How do we justify killing? Slavery? Prejudice? Gender discrimination? Some will believe slavery is acceptable if it is justified, but who gets to decide? It's often the people who use the law for their own good, twisting it to fit their evil deeds. There is no truth there."

Gregory heard the passion in Madeline's voice and felt afraid for her. What if she spoke this in the wrong ear? He didn't like slavery any more than she did, but there were powerful figures who made a fortune in selling people. These people were dangerous and would think nothing of removing a meddlesome woman.

"Surely you do not go around telling this to everyone, Miss Spencer?" he asked more calmly than he felt.

"I'm not foolish, my lord," she snorted. "I understand the consequences of such a belief. You will not reveal to others what I have said to you, will you?"

He didn't like that question at all. Did she doubt his honour? "Of course not! What sort of man do you think I am?"

Madeline smiled, knocking the breath out of him. "An honest and good man, if but a little misguided at times."

His ire passed away and was replaced by a light feeling. She believed him to be a good and honest man. Surely that was a good thing? Gregory noticed Madeline had grown silent and appeared to be intently looking at something. She left him and walked towards a group of ornaments, picking up a faerie.

"Mama gave me this, and asked me to place it anywhere in the garden."

This again? They were just having a decent conversation, but they were back to the lies again.

"Really?" he asked with a hint of sarcasm.

Her smooth brow puckered as she turned the ornament over in her hand. "A man used to call me Little Faerie, but I cannot recall who. Perhaps it was just a dream." Madeline put the faerie down and turned to him. "I must go, Lord Blithely. Aunt Dianne has been out long enough. Please thank the Duke for inviting us, and thank you for

bringing me to this garden. Good day.”

She didn't even wait for him to answer but walked off. What was that all about?

Later that day, Gregory decided to ask the Duke about the faerie. Madeline's words kept playing her mind, bothering him.

“Your Grace, I noticed a faerie amongst the other ornaments in the garden. It seemed a bit odd and out of place.”

To Gregory's horror, the Duke grew tearful. “I used to call Charlotte my Little Faerie because she was so small and magical to me. I had that ornament especially made for her third birthday. It was the very last gift I gave my daughter.”

The stunning realisation left Gregory speechless. *No, no, perhaps Madeline knew about it.*

“Was anyone else aware of the faerie besides your wife and daughter?”

"The master craftsman who made it, but he passed away twenty years ago. I wanted him to make me another faerie to keep in the house but found out he was no more. I never bothered after that."

That meant Madeline couldn't have known about it unless... unless she was Charlotte. *Have I been wrong about her all along? But what about the information about their deaths? They did board a ship, but could they have*

been on another one? The questions were swirling in Gregory's head like leaves tossed about by the wind. *I need to find out the truth.*

Chapter 14

Julia was usually a woman who liked to wait to see how things would eventually happen. She didn't want to force things and preferred for nature to 'run its course.' This wasn't one of those cases.

“Aunt Josephine! Would you please leave Charlie behind and come here? The carriage is outside waiting for us.”

Why did she ever decide to live with her aunt? The woman caused more stress in Julia's life than anyone else.

It all began four years ago when Julia attended her first Season. She had been nineteen at the time, and ready to meet someone she could fall in love with it. The other girls had even voted her as the girl most likely to marry. Month after month, Julia watched other girls meet their suitors, and eventually marry them while she remained single. It wasn't that she hadn't had her fair share of suitors, but she had never met 'the one' who would make her swoon.

I turned down so many suitors that I became known as the girl who thought she was too good for anyone.

It wasn't a label she deserved, but she was stuck with it throughout the Season. When it was all over, Julia refused to return home without a husband. It had been just too embarrassing! She asked her parents if she could remain with Aunt Josephine for a little while longer, and once she was ready to come home, she would. Her parents had agreed, likely because they felt sorry for her.

Now, four years later, Julia was still living with her aunt. *I must get married this year and move on. Another year of Aunt Josephine will surely kill me long before I become a spinster.* The woman was a walking hazard! Last winter, Aunt Josephine set her lap blanket on fire because she got too close to the fireplace. Just yesterday she dropped poor Charlie in the guest room's chamber pot. Fortunately, it was empty, but the thought of the tiny dog falling in who knew what had been nauseating.

"Charlie will miss us when we're gone, dear," Aunt Josephine called out. "I'm sure Lady Blithely will not mind him."

She most certainly would! The last time Aunt Josephine brought Charlie along to see the Viscountess he gnawed on her favourite chair. The woman had not been pleased, and Julia had believed it would be the last she saw of the family, but Lady Blithely had been uncharacteristically understanding and kind that day. *It must have been the day Marcia had received a marriage proposal. I suppose that would put any mother in a good mood.* There was no telling the Viscountess' mood today, so having the dog tag along was a big no-no.

"He has toys, a yard, and servants to play with, Aunt," Julia reasoned. "Please, leave him behind and just hurry along. We must get to the Montgomery's house before two."

After days of sitting about wondering why Gregory had decided to stop calling on her and taking her on walks through the park, Julia decided she would do something about it. *I have to know what's keeping him from pursuing me. Well, not that he pursued me before, but he had seemed interested.* As far as Julia knew, she was the only woman the Viscount had shown any interest, and she wanted it to stay that way.

Aunt Josephine finally appeared, but with Charlie at her feet. "He

wants to go, dear.”

Julia pressed her hands to her eyes, giving herself a moment. She counted to ten as she slowly lowered her hands, praying for patience.

"I said no dogs allowed, Aunt. You know what happens to Charlie in a carriage. He either tries to jump out of the window, or he becomes sick all over the interior. Leave him at home, and everyone will take care of him."

The woman sighed. "Very well." She bent down, scratching the spoilt dog behind his ears. "You'll be a good boy, won't you? Don't trouble anyone."

Aunt Josephine treated Charlie like her baby primarily because she never had any of her own. She had been betrothed once when she was younger, but the man had died from a horse-riding accident a day before their wedding day. Aunt Josephine was never the same again. She refused to be betrothed to another because she was worried that the same thing would happen again and resigned herself to a life of spinsterhood.

"Come along, Aunt. I want to see Lady Blithely and Marcia before they head out for the afternoon."

The two women liked to take a mid-afternoon walk to the park and claimed it settled their stomach, but Julia believed they did it to glean gossip from the people they happened across.

I have no idea which park they will go to today. It could be Hyde Park or

one of the smaller ones near their home. The easiest solution was to meet them at their house. *They don't know that I'm coming, so I hope they invite me in.*

Lady Blithely was notorious for sending visitors away at the door, especially if they did not meet her standards. Fortunately, being the third daughter of a baron with a sizeable income seemed to please the fussy Viscountess. *Until the day she decides Gregory can do better.* Unless the woman had already come to that conclusion which would explain why Gregory had stopped coming to call on her. Could he possibly have found another woman?

“Why are you dawdling?” Aunt Josephine inquired.

Julia had indeed stopped walking at the thought that Gregory had found someone else and she just hadn't heard about it yet.

“Sorry, Aunt. A horrible thought just occurred to me.”

“What sort of thought?”

“The one that will destroy all my plans for the future. I need to speak to Lady Blithely as soon as I can and get to the bottom of this matter.”

What if there was another woman involved? *Then I'll simply have to remove her from his life. I cannot afford to lose another suitor.* Julia was desperate, and in this state, she was willing to do almost everything to ensure that she became the next Viscountess of Blithely. She believed Gregory's mother and sister would be able to shed some light on whatever was happening in his life as they always seemed to have

their noses in everyone's business. *You're not getting away from me so easily.*

Julia couldn't wait to launch into the reason why she had come to visit Lady Blithely and Marcia, but she couldn't come right out and say it. That would appear desperate. Instead, she was sipping tea and listening to the women go on and on about Marcia's upcoming wedding and all the preparations.

Julia sensed the younger woman's smugness and knew what she was thinking. *I suppose it is pitiful that I have not managed to marry, yet she is younger and will soon become someone's wife. It would satisfy me to bring up her sister's wedding, but that would not endear me to her.* Julia would just have to bite her tongue and ignore the looks Marcia was sending her way.

"Marcia has the biggest trousseau I have ever seen, you know," Lady Blithely bragged. "We just keep adding to it! There is so much to consider once you become a married woman." The woman placed her fingers to her lips with an 'o' of mock concern. "Oh, dear! How foolish of me. Neither of you understands what it means to be married."

Did the Viscountess just say that? Julia looked to her side, hoping her aunt had not taken offence. Aunt Josephine's face had whitened several shades, and her grip on her teacup threatened to crush it, but the words that came out of the woman's mouth gave no indication of her feelings.

"I suppose you're right, my lady. However, I do find that I'm much happier than most married women. I do not have an overbearing husband to contend with, or one with a gambling habit, or even one who takes on mistresses. Fortunately, I have been spared all of those problems."

Julia was proud of her aunt at that moment. *She uses her backbone when she needs to.*

Lady Blithely pursed her lips, clearly not impressed. Her own husband had been known to take on a mistress or two, and Henrietta, who was currently pregnant, had to put up with her husband's mistress. *It cannot be easy competing with a beautiful opera singer.*

“Marcia's fiancé is a fine man, Mrs Tucker,” the Viscountess replied. “I'm certain she will not have any of these issues.”

“Let's hope,” said Aunt Josephine, smiling sweetly.

I need to change the winds of this conversation, or I will return home without my information. Julia knew how defensive her aunt could be about her unmarried state, and could say something that will eventually get them kicked out of the house.

“I'm sure Gregory is happy to have his sister married this year,” Julia cut in. “Where is he? I haven't seen him in quite some time.”

Lady Blithely and Marcia exchanged looks, their eyes wide with meaning. What did that mean?

“Well, my poor Gregory has been wrapped up in some unfortunate matters, lately,” the Viscountess explained. “He has hardly had the time to dedicate his time to his sister's upcoming wedding.”

“Oh? Has he take on another business venture?”

Julia didn't mind if it had something to do with work. After all, the more Gregory worked, the more money she would have at her disposal as his wife.

“Not at all. Do you know Miss Spencer?” the Viscountess asked.

“The American everyone has been talking about?”

The woman nodded. “The one and the same. Well, I'm not certain if I should be sharing this information, but I suppose it's bound to get out eventually. You see, Miss Spencer is claiming to be the Duke of Claverset's daughter, and now poor Gregory has to deal with that upstart.”

How could that be? The woman had only arrived in England some weeks ago, and already she was causing problems.

“Does Gregory believe her?” asked Julia.

“Certainly not!” Lady Blithely exclaimed. “The woman is an imposter, and my Gregory knows that. He is currently ensuring the woman doesn't get her claws into the Duke. You know how he loves and respects the man like a father. It's no wonder the old man wishes to bequeath up to half his estate to my son. Perhaps more.”

Well, that was a relief! If Gregory did not believe the woman, then chances were that the Duke did not believe her either. *That old man trusts Gregory.* But if Madeline was branded an imposter, what on earth was she still doing in London? Surely, she would have cut her losses and returned to America by now?

“You know, I’ve seen the woman about town, but I do not think much of her. What is she still doing here?”

Julia was lying through her teeth. She had seen Madeline around town, but that’s where the truth ended. Julia actually admired the American, the way she commanded attention wherever she went as well as the woman’s fashion sense. Madeline made everything look so effortlessly stunning, and Julia had tried to copy her confident nature once or twice.

“That’s my question as well,” the Viscountess said darkly. “I wish she would just go away and leave my family in peace. I cannot help but think she is trying to steal my son’s inheritance right from under his nose.”

Julia couldn’t let that happen. The Duke was a wealthy man and had promised to give a lot of that to Gregory. Not only did Julia wish to marry Gregory and become the next Viscountess, but she was looking forward to all the money Gregory would eventually have. *If he is wealthy, then I shall be rich as well and be the envy of every woman. I cannot let this stranger come in and ruin this for me.*

“She must be stopped, my lady,” said Julia, smacking her cup on the table. “This American upstart must not be allowed to take Gregory’s inheritance from him.”

“My sentiments exactly, my dear,” Lady Blithely agreed. “But I have not managed to think of one thing to achieve this.”

That was unfortunate. Julia had hoped the woman would have something up her sleeve, but she was evidently stumped. How can they get rid of this woman without making it obvious? *It won't be easy since she has become the Ton's darling.* An idea popped into Julia's mind.

“What if we make her stay miserable? We can make her life as difficult as possible, and force her to return to America where she belongs.”

The Viscountess scratched her chin. “That is certainly an idea, but how will we do that?”

Julia hadn't thought that far yet. *How do we make this woman's stay here England a living nightmare?*

“I suppose we'll have to find out about her daily schedule,” Julia offered. “We can find out what she likes to do, where she goes- that sort of thing. Once we've gleaned the appropriate information, we'll be able to use it against her.”

The Viscountess smiled. “I like the way you think, my dear Julia. However, is everyone else on board with the idea? I would hate for one of us to reveal this plan.”

Marcia shrugged. “Tis neither here nor there for me, Mother. Once I'm married, I'll be concerned with running my household.”

“I will do whatever my niece needs doing,” Aunt Josephine promised. “She deserves to be happy, and I believe Lord Blithely is just the man for her.”

Julia looked at her aunt appreciatively. “Thank you, Aunt.”

There was nothing like family support to motivate you to do something, even if that something wasn't particularly nice. *But it is necessary. The American must go.*

Gregory arrived just as Julia thought to leave, immediately changing her plans to stay. She touched her hair, hoping she looked her best, not that it meant much to the Viscount. The man hardly acknowledged her before taking a seat beside his sister. *I can still put my best foot forward and hope he will finally notice me.*

“You're looking happy, Marcia,” he said. “I expect the wedding arrangements are going as planned?”

“Wonderfully well,” Marcia replied, her eyes bright. “Mother and I were discussing details when Julia and Mrs Tucker arrived.”

Marcia's tone was accusatory, annoying Julia. *One hour speaking about another important subject will not jeopardise her wedding planning.*

“My apologies if I have taken time away from your wedding arrangement, Marcia,” said Julia. “That was not my intention at all.”

"I'm sure it wasn't," Gregory assured. "Julia would never intentionally cause harm to anyone."

The tips of Julia's ears grew hot. *If only he knew what I'm willing to do to ensure he gets what's due to him.* However, Gregory was an honourable man who would be horrified to hear the antics they were prepared to do to get the American out of the way.

"Dear, we've hardly seen you of late," his mother complained. "Where have you been?"

"I've been rather busy, Mother, but I've come here to pick your mind about something."

"Oh?" the woman asked.

"Yes," Gregory nodded. "It's about Miss Spencer."

Julia's interest piqued. What did Gregory wish to speak about concerning the woman?

Lady Blithely frowned. "What can I possibly tell you about Miss Spencer that you don't already know?"

"That remains to be seen," Gregory replied. "Can you recall what Miss Spencer said about her first three years in England?"

“Not particularly,” the Viscountess admitted. “I do not think she said much about it because she couldn't remember it. Why?”

“Never mind that now. I thought perhaps she had said something I missed. Did she by any chance talk about the ship she and her mother boarded to America? Possibly a storm?”

Lady Blithely screwed up her face for a moment, obviously thinking back. Why was Gregory asking so many questions about the woman? Although the Viscountess had assured her that Gregory did not believe Madeline's claim as the Duke's daughter, Julia had an instinctive feeling the woman was trouble. *I do not know what is brewing under the surface, but when the man you're interested in hardly notices you but talks about another woman, something is wrong.*

“I'm sorry dear,” the Viscountess eventually said. “But I cannot recall Miss Spencer mentioning anything about the ship or a storm.”

Gregory appeared disappointed by the news. *I hope he is not having doubts about who she is.* If that were the case, it was probable that Madeline could steal Gregory right from under her nose. *I need to get rid of her sooner than I thought.* Julia's future depended on it.

Alexander was tired of waiting and being patient. It took an entire hour to get to Madeline's house, only to be turned away at the door. He muttered to himself as he skulked back home.

“I am tired of waiting for her to come to her senses! Why won't she just come home with me?”

Alexander had never expected her to actually *leave* America to go on a wild goose chase. What did it matter that she once had a life in England? She was only three, for goodness' sake!

"She has spent the last twenty-two years in America- surely that trumps a measly three years in England?"

And yet here she was trying to prove her identity to some old Duke. Alexander felt Mr Spencer should have had a tighter hand on his daughter instead of giving her so much freedom.

"Now, his daughter is halfway across the world, looking for another father."

Mr Spencer had confided in him a day before about the situation and had charged Alexander with looking after his daughter and bringing her back home.

"I plan to do just that, but as my fiancée."

Alexander was willing to allow Madeline to do whatever she wanted, but only for a certain period. Once they were married, he would teach Madeline her role as his wife.

"I'll even release some slaves if that makes her happy."

Not all of them as that would be impossible, but a few old ones who

Alexander could afford to release.

“I don't know why she cannot see that we belong together. We're practically made for each other!”

They both belonged to the same social class, their families had money, they were popular, and they were attractive. What more did she need to see they were the perfect couple?

“Life just isn't the same without her.”

Which was why he was going to double his efforts and make her see reason... whether she liked or not.

Chapter 15

Mrs Danbridge had insisted that dark red was Madeline's colour, and she was inclined to think so as well. As she stood before her mirror, Madeline couldn't believe the transformation.

"I always believed we had the best seamstresses in America, but I have to take my hat off to Mrs Danbridge," Rebecca commented. "Not that I'm wearing one."

Madeline swayed this way and that, observing how the dress flowed around her legs. "It's magnificent, isn't it? I've always believed blue was my colour and shied away from red, but I was clearly wrong."

The deep hue of the gown complemented her fair skin and dark hair without overshadowing them. Sometimes, women wore beautiful clothing, but their attire didn't add to their beauty. *Mama always said never allow your attire to wear you, or it defeats the purpose of dressing up.*

"Lord Blithely will fall at your feet in that dress," said Rebecca, grinning.

"Don't you start, Becca. I'm not trying to impress him, but the *Ton*."

"I do hate to point this out, but he is the *Ton*."

Rebecca was right. "Ugh, why can't you keep your opinions to yourself at times? You're spoiling my mood."

The woman laughed. "I only told the truth which you claimed to prefer. I'll see if Mrs Abbot is ready so I can give you a moment to yourself to think about your Viscount."

Madeline grabbed a pillow and hurled it at her abigail, but the woman merely chuckled as she dodged it.

"Work on your aim," she said before closing the door behind her.

"I live in a state of wanting to strangle her or hug her, with seldom any time in between."

Why did she have to bring up Gregory? Madeline could not count the hours she had spent thinking about their moment in the garden or the ridiculous lengths he had gone to prove that he wasn't trying to poison them.

"Even Aunt Dianne had to admit he somewhat redeemed himself, although we haven't forgotten that he is the one standing between the Duke and I."

Madeline had thought about sending a note to inquire about his stomach, but she had decided against that. She didn't want Gregory thinking it was acceptable to meddle in her private matters.

“I know he respects the Duke, perhaps even loves him, but why can't he open his eyes and see the truth right in front of him?”

What were the chances of looking almost identical to her mother who looked exactly like the painting Madeline had seen during her last visit to the Duke's house? The evidence was dotted about the place, but somehow it wasn't enough.

“I don't know what else to do at this point except wait for Papa to send me something to prove my story.”

In the meanwhile, Madeline was getting used to life in London. The *Ton* seemed to have taken her under their wing and grafted her into their exclusive tree of privilege and influence, but one wrong move on her part would have her chopped off in one sure swoop of the axe.

“I've been careful about doing the right thing, behaving correctly, addressing people appropriately, while being the novelty they all seem to enjoy. Frankly, it's tiring.”

Madeline was looking forward to going back home, but she needed to accomplish her mission first.

“Hopefully, this ball will strengthen my influence and reputation with the *Ton*. Once that's done, I'll be able to start visiting key people.”

Madeline already had a list of the people she wanted to see about her mother. These were the ones who had spent the most time with her mother and hopefully would shed some insight into her life in England. There was so much about her mother Madeline didn't know,

and at first, she had been angry about all the secrets the woman had kept.

“As would anyone else. No one likes to have an entire life hidden away from them for over twenty years.”

Now, Madeline had come to understand why her mother had felt the need to leave, but that didn't explain the Duke's part in this.

“I still do not see what my mother described in her diary. The Duke is simply a broken man living with the memories of his wife and child.”

Well, two wives and children. If he hadn't loved her mother, why would he still be mourning? Perhaps Madeline would get the opportunity to ask the Duke to give his side of the story and finally piece the missing puzzles together. However, for now, she had a ball to attend.

It turned out that Madeline needn't have worried what people would think about her. People had swarmed around her the minute she walked into the ball, ooh-ing and aah-ing over her gown.

“I could never pull that red off,” a woman commented. “But your complexion seems to be made for it. You're awfully lucky, Miss Spencer.”

“Thank you.”

Madeline didn't even know who the woman was, which went for most

of the people crowding around her. *I'm finding it challenging to keep everyone's names straight.* Some faces and names were memorable, but others were just a blur. *I hope no one takes offence when I call them the wrong name!*

“Miss Spencer, you simply must tell us about your marvellous life in America,” said a freckle-faced man. “I hear there are savages in your land. Indians who scalp you in your sleep, and slaves who think nothing of killing their masters.”

“Where did you hear about them?” she questioned.

Madeline hated it when people stereotyped those who were different from them. *I'll bet they don't know what those very Indians and slaves think about them.*

The man shrugged. “Books and that sort- does it matter?”

"Often, books can be biased and completely wrong, sir. While there are Indians who have scalped Europeans after the very same people destroyed their homes, killed their people, and took their land, the ones I have met have been peaceful people. As for slaves, most of their masters treat them abominably. Wouldn't you be angry if someone treated you like an animal, starved you when you didn't reach your quota for the day or forced your sister to have multiple children so the master would always have a supply of free labour?"

Madeline asked the question sweetly, but the man clearly took offence to it because he moved away without a word.

“Don't mind him,” said a rather good-looking man. “His family run a slave trade.”

That explained a lot. “I see. I hope I did not offend him, that was not my intention.”

The corner of the man's mouth tipped upwards. “Arthur is easily offended if you do not hold his views, Miss Spencer.”

Ah, so that was the man's name. “I'm sorry, but I did not get your name, sir.”

"Lord Bromwick, but you can call me Michael if you would be so kind as to let me call you Madeline."

The man took her hand, bowing as he lightly kissed it. He certainly was charming. *Aunt Dianne will like him.*

“It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Michael.”

“No, no, the pleasure is all mine. Do you permit me to enter my name on your dance card? I have a feeling you will be a wonderful dancer.”

Madeline handed him the still blank card. “You'll be the first.”

"But certainly not your last," he insisted. "Men will be lining up now

that they know you're open to dancing."

Michael eventually moved on, his dark head disappearing into the sea of guests. Others took his place soon after, pleading with her to speak about her life. Madeline didn't know what rumours were circulating about her, but they seemed to have hyped her up far more than she believed necessary.

"My life isn't all that interesting," she insisted. "A little different, but not glaringly so."

Now, that wasn't true. Madeline's life was as different to most people as vinegar was to honey, but it appeared boastful to say so.

"Now, that cannot be true," said a no-name woman. "You keep dangerous animals, have a monkey and parrot as pets, brought a huge black man with you, and I hear your father owns several gold mines."

I suppose she heard right. "Perhaps I'm so accustomed to my life that I fail to see how peculiar it is compared to the lives of others. If you would like, you can come to my house and meet my pets."

The woman's eyes widened. "Indeed? What about your manservant? I promise I will not gawk at him, I've just never seen a black man with my own two eyes. In books, yes, but nowhere else."

The woman appeared harmless if but a little too enthusiastic about seeing Jeremiah. *I suppose he's just as much a novelty as I am. I might also be excited to see a black man if I had never come across one before.*

“Send a note next week detailing the day and time you'd like to come.”

“Oh, truly?” the woman gushed. “How lovely! My friends will be so jealous!”

The young woman hurried away, no doubt to tell her friends about what had just happened. *I hope I'm not making the wrong decision.* She would have to tell Jeremiah beforehand; to warn him.

Guests continued to ply her with questions, pulling her this way and that.

I've become a rag doll at this point, but it's preferable to being a wallflower.

Madeline had noticed several men and women looking forlorn as they sat by themselves along the ballroom walls. She wanted to approach them, and speak with them, but no sooner would she take two steps that someone else would stop her. It hadn't escaped her attention that Gregory was nowhere to be seen. Wasn't he coming? Camilla had assured her that anyone worth their title would be here, and that included Gregory.

“I haven't seen his mother or sisters yet. Perhaps they are here but at the opposite end of the room.”

Or possibly in one of the many rooms of the house. Madeline had seen the Dowager Countess take several people out of the ballroom on

supposedly a tour of her jewellery.

"I've never heard anyone having a room dedicated to jewellery before."

Camilla had assured Madeline that the room was impressive and had its own security. The main attraction was a pink diamond worth millions which the Dowager Countess only wore on special days like her birthday.

"A pink diamond does sound impressive, but I'm not without my own experience of rare stones."

Madeline had her own collection, but it was tucked away in a heavy-duty safe, and not on display.

"Talking to yourself, dear?" said her aunt appearing out of nowhere. "I thought you might need this."

Madeline gratefully took the glass of champagne from her aunt. All the talking she had done had given her a parched throat.

"I finally managed to have a little time on my own, but it won't be long. Are you enjoying the ball?"

"The house is certainly grand, and the Totnes know how to throw a ball, but I'm accustomed to our own back home. When do you think we'll be able to return?"

Madeline sighed. "You're as homesick as I am, aren't you?"

"As sick as a pirate the day after stealing a bounty of rum and guzzling the lot down."

Laughing, Madeline hugged her aunt to her side. "Just a little while longer, Aunt. I promise. Let me do all I can to find out about my mother and perhaps prove who I am. If I'm not successful, then I'll gladly return to America."

"I suppose that's fair," her aunt agreed. "Tell me, how full is your dance card?"

"I only have three spaces left."

"May I perhaps take one of those places, my dear?"

Both Madeline and her aunt turned at the same time, seeing the Duke looking dapper in his evening attire. Oddly, she had not thought she would see him here.

"Your Grace, how lovely to see you," Madeline greeted.

"It would be lovelier if you would permit me the next dance, child. How do you do, Mrs Abbot? You look stunning."

Aunt Dianne waved her hand at him. "Oh, get on with you. You look good yourself, Your Grace. Madeline, go with the Duke."

"I would love to dance with you, Your Grace," said Madeline, giving a shallow dip.

The man's eyes lit up. "Shall we?" he asked, holding out his arm.

Madeline felt it was the most natural thing in the world to take his arm. It felt familiar and safe.

The Duke led her to the centre of the dance floor, and as though by magic, the band started to play a dancing tune. Madeline's mother had taught her how to dance from a young age, and Camilla had filled her in on the latest dances. Madeline had no qualms with falling into step with the fast melody, laughing as all the swirling around left her giddy. The Duke was surprisingly nimble on his feet, joining in her laughter as they passed each other before he took her hand for a moment to walk her around him.

The dance set came to a breathless end all too soon, but Madeline felt exhilarated.

"Who taught you to dance so well, Miss Spencer?" the Duke asked.

"My mother, Your Grace. She believed every woman should know how to dance, and made sure I practised until it became second

nature.”

The Duke's entire demeanour appeared to change in a flash. “My wife was an excellent dancer just like you, my dear,” he said sadly. “Thank you for the dance, Miss Spencer. Would you please excuse me?”

Madeline watched the man walk away, her heart going out to him. *You're my father, but I've been barred from claiming you. If only life was just.*

“You look lovely this evening, Miss Spencer.”

Why did she feel she was constantly spinning around to see people? *Why can't they appear in front of me?* However, this time she took her time turning to the man she had wanted to see the moment she arrived. When did Gregory arrive? As she turned, Madeline felt her breath catch at her first sight of him. The man looked simply beautiful in his suit, and with the lighting falling on his pale hair, he seemed magical.

“Thank you, my lord,” she eventually got out. “You look handsome.”

“But I do not compare to you,” he returned. “Would you give me the honour of the next dance?”

Gregory wanted to dance with her? Evidently so because he held out his hand to her. Once again, it felt natural to place her hands in his and allow him to draw her into the next dance. This was a newer dance, one the people were calling the 'waltz.' It called for a couple to stand closer together than was normal, and that too for the entire set.

Madeline felt Gregory's strong hand settle gently upon her back, knocking the air out of her. She certainly had not felt like this when Camilla had taught her the dance! As Gregory whirled her about the floor, Madeline found she couldn't take her eyes off him. He likely felt the same way because he didn't look away.

The dance ended way too soon, but Gregory didn't let go. Madeline didn't pull away either, waiting to see what he would do. Honestly, she felt comfortable in his arms and didn't feel the need to go anywhere.

“Another set, Miss Spencer?” he asked.

“Are you not too tired?”

Gregory smiled. “I could go a hundred sets and not be tired.”

She chuckled. “One more will do.”

This time, the set called for them to dance further apart, but their eyes never left each other. Madeline didn't know if she imagined it, but she could sense a shift happening between them. It was like an invisible string had been attached to them, and now it was drawing them towards each other whether they like it or not. At one point, the music faded away, and all Madeline was aware of was the beating of her heart. *I swear I can almost hear his, but that's impossible, isn't it?*

All too soon, the song ended, and she found herself mildly disoriented.

Michael appeared beside her, giving Gregory a brief glance. "I believe it's my turn next."

"Oh," she said, looking to Gregory.

Gregory blinked once, backing away. "Of course. Thank you for the dance, Miss Spencer."

And he was gone. Michael took Gregory's place, smiling down at her. "You dance like a gazelle, Madeline. I couldn't take my eyes off you. Shall we?"

The music started, and Madeline was forced to perform the steps, but her mind was with the man who had just undone her. *I don't feel so annoyed with him anymore, and I've found myself making excuses about how he handled the situation between the Duke and I.* Gregory was undoubtedly in the wrong, but he had done it out of concern for the Duke.

Could she really be mad at that? At least there was someone taking care of him. However, she wouldn't be in the position of pleasing countless people if Gregory had just allowed the Duke to accept her as his daughter. *Perhaps I would have been preparing to return home having done all that I set out to do.* Most importantly, the Duke would not have the sad look in his eyes.

Chapter 16

Stupid, stupid, stupid! Gregory repeated the word in his head as he walked away from Madeline, feeling like an absolute fool.

Two dances? Two?!

What had he been thinking? Gregory did not know what possessed him to find Madeline and ask for a dance, let alone two. It was like he had been caught up in the moment and could not help himself. Catching his first glimpse of her as he led his mother and sister into the ballroom had probably been the starting point. Madeline had stood out far above the rest, and appeared to almost glow.

“Or perhaps that was due to the lamps above her head.”

Whatever the reason, she had looked amazing. At that point, Gregory had decided to avoid her and prayed the Duke would do the same. He had been surprised when the man informed him that he was going to the ball, giving no explanation for his sudden change of mind. The Duke hadn't been to a ball for over five years, preferring to stay at home. Now, not only had he come to the ball in his evening best but had danced with the very woman Gregory had warned him to stay away from.

“It's like I'm talking to a wall when it comes to her. I tell him not to do something, and he does it anyway.”

How was he supposed to protect the man if he insisted on doing the

opposite of everything? Gregory had watched them dancing, noting how happy they seemed together. There appeared to be a natural and comfortable air about them, as though the pair knew each other well.

"Of course, that's ridiculous. They've only just met."

Although Gregory had begun to wonder if Madeline's story was, in fact, true, they were still without proof. Until evidence could be provided, Madeline would remain a dangerous stranger. A beautiful one, but still dangerous.

When the music ended after a few minutes, Madeline and the Duke had not immediately left the floor, but continued to speak a little. At that point, Gregory had made his way forward, worried the Duke might ask a question about his wife, and Madeline would lie to him. The Duke moved away before Gregory reached them, and he had seen how the man's shoulders had slumped forward and witnessed the familiar sadness filling his eyes. Instead of scolding Madeline and demanding to know what she had said to the Duke, Gregory had asked for a dance instead.

"Of all the foolish things to do. I still do not know what came over me."

Well, whatever it was had come over him again because he refused to let go of her after the waltz ended. Madeline had been as light on her feet as on the night of her dinner party, and Gregory had once again experienced that sensation of 'fitting together.'

"I forgot myself when I was with her."

It was only now with people staring at him with speculative eyes that he realised the repercussions of his brief moment with Madeline. One dance was perfectly acceptable, but two showed interest. Everyone was looking at him because they assumed he liked Madeline and was staking his claim on her. A root of possessiveness reared its head, agreeing with whatever the people were thinking, but Gregory mentally squashed it down.

“I will not be undone by a woman. I'll just play it down if someone asks me about it.”

That someone turned out to be his mother and his sisters. When had Henrietta arrived? And was she looking thicker around the middle than he recalled? Gregory kissed his sister's offered cheek, smelling her heavy perfume. Why did Henrietta believe that the more you put on, the better you smelt? A person could smell her on the other side of the world if they wanted to.

“What were you doing?” his mother demanded.

“Dancing?” he offered.

“Dancing my foot!” she spat out. “Since when does anyone have a dalliance with an enemy?”

“What are you on about, Mother? There was no dalliance but a dance.”

“Then why were people staring at you? They were all thinking the same thing. You have something going on with that woman- admit it.”

Gregory wasn't going to admit that he did feel something. That would be shooting himself in the foot, wouldn't it? However, he wasn't going to stand here and be accused of having a dalliance with Madeline. It was disrespectful to both him and her.

"Why did you dance twice with the imposter, Gregory?" his mother asked again. "Answer me!"

"Why should I explain myself?" he snapped. "Am I not a grown man who can make decisions for himself? I do not need my mother or my sisters looking at me with judgement in their eyes."

"Gregory-"

"Mother! Stop being so melodramatic. What is the matter with you? Haven't you ever heard of the saying keeping your friends close, and your enemies closer? So what if I danced with her twice? At least she's beginning to trust me enough, and perhaps she'll say something stupid that I can use against her."

That wasn't it at all! Gregory was appalled at how easily the lie fell from his lips. *Am I so afraid of what others will think that I'm resorting to lies? I shouldn't have to explain myself to anyone.*

His mother harrumphed; her lips pursed. She didn't appear to believe him. "Very well, I'll not say anything else but this one thing: have you ever danced with Julia twice? You were supposedly interested in her at one point, but ever since Miss Spencer came into the picture, you've forgotten about her."

What did Julia Sandton have to do with anything? *I wasn't exactly interested in her, I simply paid her a little attention to get my mother off my neck about marrying, but I guess that backfired on me.* Julia was a nice girl, but he didn't feel she fitted his idea of a suitable wife. Perhaps at one point, Gregory may have considered her, but that moment passed.

"Julia is a good woman, Mother, but I do not recall encouraging her to assume there was something between us, neither did I give you that idea."

"Oh, indeed?" his mother questioned. "I do not think you are being truthful with yourself or me Gregory. Frankly, I'm disappointed in you."

Gregory blew out a sharp gust of air. It seemed his mother wanted to have her own way, but he wasn't inclined to give it to her.

"Believe whatever you want, Mother. I'm going."

"One more thing, dear," his mother insisted.

"What is it?"

"Have you ever considered that Miss Spencer could be married?"

Gregory paused. "What did you say?"

His mother smirked. "You heard what I said, son. What if Miss Spencer is married? Think about it."

Inexplicable anger hurtled through him, making him take a step back. The thought of Madeline being with anyone else was not something he wanted to consider. Gregory shook the red haze from his eyes, fixing his mother with a stern gaze.

"Stop talking nonsense. I never want to hear something so ridiculous again."

Something in his tone must have warned her to resist the argument that so easily came to her lips.

"Of course, son," she replied, her voice small.

Gregory loved his mother, he really did, but that didn't give her the right to say whatever she liked and expect him to accept it. Nodding his head, he turned his back on them and walked off.

Gregory kept as far away from Madeline as he could manage, but he could always tell where she was in the room. His mother's words kept haunting him, forcing him to confront the seed of doubt she had sown in his mind. What if Madeline was married?

"She's twenty-five- long past the usual age of marriage. Why isn't she

married?”

Gregory had no doubt that she would have had suitors fighting to gain her attention, and at least one of them should have caught her fancy.

“She's beautiful, intelligent, and supposedly comes with a rather large inheritance. It seems odd that she hasn't married yet.”

Unless Madeline was hiding it. Could she have run away from her husband, hoping to meet someone else in England? Or, was her husband lurking somewhere in the shadows and supporting her scheme to fool the Duke? These were all things to consider because Gregory had come across imposters with these exact backstories. Only Madeline's story had seemed both far-fetched and wholly believable.

His eyes tracked her movements, narrowing them at the countless men staring at her. What was she talking about? No doubt something about her life in America. That was all people wanted to hear.

“I would think by now the whole of London would know everything about her life.”

Gregory kept waiting to hear inconsistencies, but she kept to the same story time and time again. Madeline was either a great liar or an honest woman.

“Sometimes I wonder if I've simply misunderstood her. She hasn't asked for money from the Duke, and she has paid for her accommodation in full. Madeline has an army of servants keeping the place clean and tidy, and she never stops shopping.”

Camilla had informed him of Madeline's love of shopping, and oft times had accompanied her. The American woman apparently had the shopkeepers eating out of her hand, and she rewarded them by buying plenty.

"I wonder how she's going to transport everything back. She already came with a mountain of luggage."

When would she eventually return to America? Gregory had no doubt many people would be sad to see her go, but how would he feel?"

"I'll be glad to see the back of her for the Duke's sake, but..."

There was a twinge of disappointment and fear at the thought of her departure. Of course, she needed to leave, but what if she was to stay?

"What am I thinking? The sooner she leaves, the sooner things can go back to normal again."

The Duke would be freed from his need to have Madeline be his daughter, and Gregory would be released from his need to be near her. It was a win-win situation all around.

Leaning against the wall, Gregory happened to look towards the door and noticed that Julia had just arrived. Why did his mother scold him about the woman?

"I'm quite sure I never gave much attention to her. I might have been polite once or twice and asked to walk with her, or called on her to inquire after her aunt who suffered a fall last winter, but that was it."

Had Julia perhaps said something to his mother? No, Julia had common sense. The woman wouldn't do anything so foolish. Maybe he could get his mother to take her fixation off Madeline by asking Julia for a dance.

"I should dance with her twice for good measure, but I don't want her getting any ideas."

The woman was accompanied by her aunt, who was shrouded in black and navy blue.

"Interesting choice of dress."

The two women made their way to where Gregory's mother and sisters stood, greeting each other with a light kiss on either cheek. His mother appeared to approve of the woman, and there really was nothing wrong with Julia, but there was nothing particularly right about her either. For him, anyway.

"When did I become so picky? At one point, I suppose I did consider her as wife material."

But the notion had never stuck. Gregory turned his attention back to Madeline, surprised to no longer see her. Where on earth was she? He

scanned the room, his eyes falling on her raven-coloured hair seconds later.

“She's dancing again. Her feet will fall off at this point.”

Gregory felt just the teensiest bit jealous of the man who currently had all her attention.

“I can't dance with her again, but I can get close to her.”

Perhaps he might get the opportunity to corner her and enquire about what his mother had said. It was worth a try, wasn't it? Gregory couldn't just walk onto the dance floor without a partner, but he could kill two birds with one stone if he asked Julia to dance with him. Not only would it get him on the dance floor, but it would please his mother and put a smile back on her sour face.

Gregory made a beeline for the women, putting on his most charming smile. “Julia, it's good to see you again. You look pretty.”

The woman ducked her head, her cheeks reddening. “Thank you, Gregory.”

“Would you like to dance?” he asked.

Gregory felt his mother's narrowed eyes on him, but he resisted the urge to look at her. Julia's head came up quickly, surprise registering on her face.

“You would like to dance with me?”

“Of course, why not? Shall we?”

Julia took his arm, hardly able to hide her eagerness. *Perhaps she feels I'll change my mind. I feel terrible using her like this, but I'll make sure to make it known that I'm not interested in marrying her.* He would have to do it gently, or he'd risk hurting the woman's feelings.

Gregory drew her to the group of dancing guests, getting as close as he could to Madeline. He and Julia soon fell into step with the others, turning, swapping places, and partners until he was face-to-face with Madeline. She appeared surprised to see him, but at least she was smiling.

“We meet again, Miss Spencer.”

“Only for a few seconds, my lord. I'll soon be back with my partner.”

The question of her possible marriage rose to his mind, but Gregory soon realised how stupid it would sound. *How can I ask her such a question in the middle of a dance? That would be ridiculous.*

Too soon, he had to spin Madeline away to her partner as Julia returned to him, her cheeks flushed with exercise. Gregory noted that she was pretty, and would make a fine wife, but for another man. *I wish Julia would forget about me and focus on someone else. I simply*

cannot give her what she is looking for. It seemed the pot was calling the kettle black because he was currently thinking about a woman who didn't seem to have much interest in him. *It shouldn't even matter to me whether Madeline is married or not.* It didn't change the fact that Gregory needed to keep her far away from the Duke until he could prove without a doubt that she was an imposter.

Lately, Gregory's drive to expose the woman's lies had slacked off, and he solely put the blame on her. Madeline was distracting and was probably doing it with the purpose of throwing him off her scent. *That's not going to happen.*

Fortunately, the dance ended, and he could return Julia to the other women.

"Thank you for the dance, Gregory," Julia gushed. "I haven't danced that much in so long!"

"It was my pleasure, Julia. You'll make your future husband to proud to dance with you. I imagine you have suitors all lining up to court you, yes?"

Guilt rode him like a wave when her face fell. "Oh, uh, yes, I do have suitors. I just haven't found the right one yet. Have you found the right woman?"

His immediate answer was yes, but Gregory swallowed it. What on earth was he thinking? He had no woman in mind.

"No, not yet, but I'm not looking until I have Marcia married and in

her own home. When she is settled, I'll put more thought into what I would like in a wife."

Julia nodded, saying nothing. He had disappointed her, that much was certain, but he couldn't let her continue to believe she had any chance with him. Gregory didn't bother to stick around with the women once he returned Julia to them, but made his excuses and looked for the first door leading out to the garden.

He needed a break from everything, and since he couldn't go home just yet, the garden was his best choice. The memory of walking with Madeline through the Duchess' garden filtered into his mind, making him smile. She had been filled with such wonder at all the beauty, not holding back any of her reactions.

I suppose I can give her that. She never hides her feelings, or at least, I can always read them.

However, Gregory wanted to know what was going on in her mind. What did she want with the Duke? All the other imposters had wanted prestige and wealth, but she already had that in America. It didn't make sense for her to claim to be someone she was not.

"There has to be a motive. If I can just find out what that is, I'll be able to put this entire matter to rest."

But did he want to see the back of her? Lately, Gregory's life had been consumed with Madeline. He was always either thinking about her or wanting to see her.

I look at the Duke and see his sadness, and that makes me want to put her on the first ship back to America. Then I look at her and speak with her, and I don't want her to leave.

Was this normal? Perhaps it was now, but it never used to be.

I'm beginning to understand what men mean when they say that women drive them to insanity.

Because he was slowly losing his mind, yet he wasn't angry about it.

Chapter 17

Madeline couldn't concentrate on her book. It was an interesting novel, but it wasn't taking her mind off her worries.

Should I be worrying? Even Aunt Dianne picked up on the change in the atmosphere.

Sighing, she placed her book beside her, her finger keeping her page. Last night had been wonderful! Everyone had clamoured around her, fired questions left, right, and centre, and she had answered them all with her usual flair.

I made sure to make everyone feel special and a friend of mine. They had all seemed pleased with me.

Up until the end. What could have happened?

"Still under the hatches, dear?" asked Aunt Dianne from the doorway.

Madeline looked up, noticing at the second cup in the woman's hand. "Hot chocolate?"

"I asked Camilla for the recipe some days ago and thought this was a good a day as any to try it out. It's not quite like ours, but I can get used to it."

Aunt Dianne walked further into the room, handing Madeline her cup before taking a seat beside her. Madeline took a grateful sip, swirling the thick drink in her mouth.

“It's rather spicy and nutty, isn't it?”

“It's a blend of cardamom, aniseed, almonds, and a few other ingredients I cannot recall right now. Do you like it?”

Madeline thought about it while she smacked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “It could do with more milk, I think, but it's pleasantly different.”

Aunt Dianne patted her thigh. “Good dear, I'm glad you like it. Chocolate is said to make you feel better, but I'm not entirely sure if that's true.”

“We'll try it and see. Tea usually makes everything better, but perhaps chocolate is the way to go.”

They both sipped their drinks, blowing on them slightly. Madeline knew her aunt was also thinking about the ball and wondering how to broach the subject.

“You can say it, Aunt Dianne. I don't mind.”

"I just don't understand!" her aunt began. "Everything was going so perfectly, dear. I saw how everyone wanted to be around you, and even the ladies I was with couldn't stop saying wonderful things about you. They all liked you!"

"Then what could have possibly happened to make them change so suddenly?"

They grew quiet again, both lost in their thoughts. Madeline had been going through everything that had happened at the ball as she tried to figure out at what point things began to go south. She recalled a woman stepping on her foot during one of the dances, and Madeline saw the same woman going off with Gregory to stand by his mother and sisters.

"Do you know the woman Lord Blithely danced with last night?"

"No, not at all, dear," said Aunt Dianne. "I cannot believe she stepped on your foot. Are you sure it was intentional?"

"Based on the dark look she gave me? Yes."

The woman had stared at Madeline with such anger that it had surprised her. *I don't even know who she is! How can she be so angry with me?* Madeline didn't dance again after that, declining all dance requests. It was soon after that she found people staring at her and whispering behind their fans. They had not done that before, but something had clearly happened to change their opinion of her.

"Why don't you ask Lord Blithely?" her aunt suggested. "He is the one

who danced with her. He must know her.”

Madeline had no doubt that Gregory knew who the woman was because she had watched him take her to his mother and sisters. Was the woman possibly a cousin?

“I cannot ask him, Aunt. That would seem strange on my part, and he might want to know why I'm asking. I cannot tell him that the woman purposefully stood on my foot.”

Madeline still had a red welt where the woman had stood, and it was slowly turning black. She presently had it wrapped with some herbal concoction Rebecca had made. Her handmaiden seemed to think Madeline's attacker had cast the evil eye on her, and that was why everyone suddenly turned on her.

"Why not?" Aunt Dianne pressed. "Your foot has swollen to twice its original size. If she had stepped on your foot by mistake, you must have had a little bruise or a scratch. However, you have a large welt that was crusted with blood when you returned home. How you managed to walk, the Lord only knows. Did that women glue pebbles to the bottom of her shoe? I don't know how else she could have caused such damage."

“Your guess is as good as mine, Aunt. Right now, I'm not overly concerned about the attack, but everyone's changed behaviour towards me. Hardly any of the women spoke to me, and they made it known in no uncertain terms that I was no longer welcome.”

Madeline had left soon after, disappointed and bewildered by it all. Not only was she injured, but also ostracised in one night. That had never happened to her. *Perhaps it was a mistake coming to England, after*

all. I have tried so hard to be everything these people expected of me, but in seemingly one blink of an eye, they all turned on me.

"I wanted to climb that stage where the orchestra was playing, and give everyone a piece of my mind," said Aunt Dianne. "How dare they treat my niece like this? What right do they have? Perhaps this will prove that we need to go back home, dear. We're not going to fit into this world. There was a reason why your mother left it all behind."

Perhaps Aunt Dianne was right. Could her mother have suffered the same treatment? What was probably the most hurtful of all was Gregory's attitude towards her. He, too, had not paid her a second glance once he returned from outside. Madeline had watched him go, and thought to follow him, but had quickly decided against it. He had seemed troubled, and she wondered if it had anything to do with the woman he had danced with.

"I think I should sleep on this before I make such a decision, Aunt. I came here to find out about Mama's life and possibly reunite with my biological father. It's not easy knowing that I'll have to abandon that and go home."

"But just think how happy you'll be once you're with your family, dear. No one loves you here, but you have an entire family and community in America who love you just as you are."

Madeline sighed, dropping her head on her aunt's shoulder. "I'm so glad you came with me, Aunt. I don't know what I would have done without you."

Aunt Dianne caressed her cheek. "You never have to worry about that, dear. We're family, and we stick together. I'm somewhat glad I got to

go on this adventure with you. At least I'll have something to tell the ladies once I get back."

What would Madeline tell everyone? That she failed in her mission? *Perhaps I can leave that part out and concentrate on the good things like all my shopping trips, the etiquette I had to learn, and so much more.*

"Is there a limit to the amount of baggage we can take on the ship? I've never thought to ask."

"We'll just have to ask, dear."

Madeline heard the chatter of a monkey before a dog barked, and a bird squawked.

"I suppose the little dears are back from their walk," Aunt Dianne commented.

And not too soon because Madeline could do with some cheering up. Jeremiah brought them in minutes later, cautioning the animals to walk and not run. They listened right up until the moment they reached her, and then she was attacked with affectionate pecks, slobber, and hair-pulling.

Aunt Dianne shook her head. "I don't know how you put up with them, dear. My duckie is enough for me."

Madeline laughed as she untangled Lemony from her neck, ordered

Hippocrates to sit, and told Tally to perch on her shoulder. They all obeyed, and watched her with open affection, waiting for her to give each of them their due attention. Madeline gave them each several kisses, showering them with words of affection. Animals were simple creatures when it came to love.

If you treated them kindly, they wholeheartedly gave their love to you. They didn't suddenly ignore you, or behave terribly towards you unless they were sick. *Animals do not have malicious bones in their body, not like humans. Sometimes I wonder why animals are called beasts when humans do all the unnecessary killing, hating, backstabbing, and just about everything nasty.* Was it any wonder why she preferred to spend time with her animals?

Madeline was interrupted when Rebecca walked into the room, her eyes wide.

“What is it?” Madeline asked.

“Would you like to hazard a guess about who is outside your door right now?”

Could it be Gregory? Madeline's traitorous heart lifted. “I don't know. Who is it?”

Rebecca didn't have to say a thing because she heard the man's voice. “Maddy! Please, I need to speak with you.”

“Is that Alexander?” Aunt Dianne asked.

Madeline groaned. What was Alexander doing here? He was the last person she wished to see right now. *He would do me a world of good if he just went back to America and left me alone.*

Madeline sighed. "Is Jeremiah with him?"

"Yes," said Rebecca. "He's keeping Mr Stratford from coming into the house, but he's demanding to see you. I'm afraid he'll make a scene and..."

Madeline understood. "Very well, bring him in."

Alexander came marching into the room moments later, coming as close to her as the animals would let him. *I'm glad Jeremiah brought them to me when he did.*

"What is the meaning of all this, Alexander? You're an intelligent man, yet you have failed to understand that I do not wish to marry you. What will it take for you to leave me alone?"

"Dear, be nice," Aunt Dianne whispered.

"This is nice, Aunt. I've had just about enough of his shenanigans."

"Why won't you understand that I love you, Maddy?" Alexander asked. "A man doesn't give up on the woman he loves just because

there are obstacles. I crossed an ocean for you- doesn't that mean anything?"

"It means that you wasted a lot of money, time, and effort when you could have stayed at home and found a suitable wife."

"But I have found my wife!" he insisted. "You're the one I want to marry and spend the rest of my days with. You're just too stubborn to accept we belong together."

There he went again telling her what he believed was right, never mind what she thought.

"Alexander, dear, why don't you take a seat?" her aunt suggested. "It looks like you have a lot on your mind."

"Don't encourage him," Madeline whined.

"Madeline Spencer!" the woman scolded. "Where are your manners? You can at least be hospitable to the poor man. You know he basically stays outside London and travels an hour or more just to get here."

"Who asked him?" Madeline muttered.

"Maddy," her aunt hissed. "This is not how debutantes behave. Remember your upbringing."

“Very well. Would you like to take a seat, Alexander?” she ground out. “Perhaps refreshment to make up for the long journey?”

Alexander grinned. “That's more like it. I know you had it in you. Just a tea, Rebecca,” he ordered.

He didn't bother looking at the woman, which was just as well because Rebecca was making strangling movements with her hands. Madeline bit back a laugh, motioning for the woman to go.

“As I was saying,” Alexander continued. “We're made for each other. Coming to England was pure foolishness on your part, but I'm willing to overlook that.”

“Oh, how kind of you,” Madeline said drily.

“Don't mention it. I've come here to bring you to your senses, Maddy. Now, I didn't want to tell you any of this, but your father charged me with looking after you while you were here. He's terrified something terrible might befall you, and being the man that I am, he put his trust in me. I'm asking you to do the same and come home with me. We can be married within a month of setting foot in America.”

Papa spoke to him? No wonder Alexander had been able to follow her all the way here. *Papa must have given him all my travel details and helped him get on the ship.* Madeline should be angry with her father, but the man was just worried about her.

That's what father's do. Despite him knowing that she wasn't his

daughter, Madeline's father had treated her like his own and given her his name and inheritance. She had never taken advantage of her father's generosity and love, but now it made her see just how wonderful he indeed was. *I miss him and all my brothers. Maybe I should return home and put this behind me.* However, it wouldn't be under the condition of marriage.

"You don't know what love is, Alexander."

He frowned. "That's preposterous. I know that I love you. I'm here, aren't I? If that's not love, then I don't know what it is."

"What is it about me that you love?"

That appeared to stump him a little. "Well," he said, rubbing his chin. "When I first clapped eyes on you, I knew that I would marry you. We come from the same background, our families know each other, and everyone says that we're perfect for each other. Imagine how powerful our families would be once we unite?"

Madeline slowly nodded. "That's what I thought. You like the idea of me, but you don't love me. You want to be seen with me, to show me off to your friends. You like knowing that we could be called the power couple of America, but you fail to understand that is not love. Perhaps infatuation, but certainly not love. Now, if you don't mind, I need to go lie down."

Madeline had woken up with a faint ache behind her eyes, but it had turned into a full-blown headache since Alexander's abrupt arrival.

“But, you cannot leave now!” said Alexander. “You need to explain yourself.”

Madeline ignored him, turning to her aunt. “Would you please entertain him? I cannot handle this right now.”

Aunt Dianne patted her hand. "Of course, dear. You go and lie down now. I'll come to see you a little later."

Madeline smiled in appreciation. Aunt Dianne had always liked Alexander, so it wouldn't be hard for her to spend a little time with him. *As long as she doesn't encourage him to pursue me. I've had all I can take of Alexander Stratford.* But her foolish heart did wish to see another man who wanted her gone. Such was life.

Chapter 18

The best thing about having a house apart from the family home, was the peace and privacy that Gregory enjoyed. However, today not even his townhouse could give him any relief from his tumultuous thoughts.

“You appear stressed,” said Adam. “Is it your sister's wedding?”

Gregory had sent his friend a message to meet him along their usual horse trail. He had not wanted to be alone, and since his family was always troubling him, Adam had been the best choice for company. Gregory hadn't seen him in a while and decided this would be the best time to catch up with each other's lives. *Although I don't know how much of my own, I'm willing to divulge.*

“Partly,” Gregory replied vaguely. “I haven't heard much about your courtship with Hannah Winkel. How is that going?”

“My parents are pushing me to ask for her hand, but I don't feel that I'm ready for all that yet.”

"You'll be thirty-three come winter- how 'ready' do you have to be?"

Adam raised his eyebrows. “So says the man who has not even committed himself to a courtship. When will you finally settle down?”

“I want to get my sisters married and established in their own houses before I think about such things. I've told you this before.”

“Henrietta is married, and it's just a matter of time before Marcia is married,” Adam reminded him. “It's time for you to start thinking seriously about settling down. Has no woman caught your attention at all?”

Madeline's face immediately popped into Gregory's mind, taunting him. She was the last woman he ever wanted to be remotely interested in, but he couldn't deny the spark within him whenever she was near. *Although I did not treat her kindly at the ball.* His mother's words had affected Gregory far more than he had believed, and he eventually got to the point of wanting to lash out at Madeline and demand she tell him everything about this supposed husband. *I couldn't ask her when she was right in front of me, but I found myself growing increasingly angry when I left the ballroom for a little clarification.*

Gregory had tried to reason with himself, to argue that it was of no consequence to him. What did it matter if she was married? All he was concerned about was getting her out of the Duke's life. If she was indeed married, it would be grounds to finally remove her from their lives. It would have proven Madeline as a liar, and nothing she said could be trusted. Instead, Gregory had become angry at the thought that another man could claim Madeline as his wife. *I barely paid her any mind once I returned from outside. Anyone with eyes to see would have known I was angry.* And that was what made it all seem much worse.

Gregory hated high emotions and preferred to keep a level mood, at all times. He had seen the hurt come over Madeline's eyes when he passed her by, and a part of him had wanted to go back to her and apologise for his impulsive behaviour, but pride had kept him moving towards his family. *She must not understand what is going on.* Gregory was blowing hot and cold, and he knew it. One minute he was smiling and dancing with her, and the next, he was giving her the cold

shoulder.

“Ah, so there is a woman!” Adam exclaimed. “I would say the American, but you would never develop a *tendre* for a woman like that. I, on the other hand, wouldn't mind such a delightful creature in my life. I daresay I would never be bored.”

Hearing his friend speak about his admiration for Madeline prompted Gregory to shoot his friend a warning look, surprising the man. *Imbecile! Control your feelings, you daft duck.*

“Goodness! What did I say wrong?” the man asked.

“You need to stay away from that woman, Adam. She's bad news.”

Adam's eyebrows disappeared into his overhanging curls. “Bad news? I beg to differ. I haven't seen or heard anything that would make me change my opinion of her. Have you?”

“You should take my word for it.”

The man grew quiet, looking ahead at the group of people walking along the same trail. *What is he thinking? I hope he isn't considering Miss Spencer.* Gregory didn't want any man near her, least of all his own friend. He wanted to believe that he wished to protect Adam from Madeline, but it was a statement made in jealousy.

“You seem to know her rather well,” Adam said some moments after.

"I know of her," Gregory corrected.

"I daresay you would know her better than most since she stays in one of your townhouses. Didn't she have dinner with you and your family soon after her arrival?"

"Yes," Gregory agreed. "But what does that have to do with anything?"

Adam shrugged. "You seem so passionate about this matter. I understand that you are apprehensive of Americans, but Miss Spencer has proven herself good enough for the *Ton*. Why would your opinion differ from theirs? Unless you know something we don't. Do you?"

Was it appropriate to confide in his friend about the whole fiasco surrounding the insufferable but unforgettable woman? *Adam has been my friend for over two decades, and I trust him more than I trust my own family.* Their conversation would not go further than the horses.

"Do you recall some years ago the drama surrounding women claiming to be the Duchess of Claverset and her daughter, Lady Russell?"

Adam nodded. "I do. It was a stressful time for the Duke, and I remember how incensed you would become. There wasn't a week that passed where you weren't ready to dump people in the Thames."

Gregory had been consumed with protecting the Duke, often pushing his other duties aside. He couldn't recall how it all started, but when one woman decided that she could possibly fool a lonely Duke and get what she can out of him, others had followed. *They had been so creative in their deceit that even I was temporarily fooled once or twice.* Gregory had wanted to believe the Duchess and her daughter were not truly dead and had come back to bring happiness into the Duke's life. *Anything to make the Duke happy once more.* But it was never meant to be, and Gregory eventually realised that such things did not happen.

“Miss Spencer is claiming to be Lady Russell.”

Adam's mouth dropped open. “You don't say! Miss Spencer? Why? I heard the woman is a rich heiress.”

“That much is true, but that doesn't change the fact she's trying to convince the Duke she is his daughter. To make matters worse, she looks like the Duchess. Almost identical.”

“What are the odds of that?! What did the Duke say?”

Gregory sighed. “He's growing more and more convinced of her identity every day, and that worries me. I have to admit that her story is the most believable to date, but that could just mean she is a good liar.”

A beautiful liar who had turned his organised world upside down. Gregory urged his horse to the side when a carriage passed by, kicking up dirt into the air. He coughed, glaring at the back of the disappearing wooden contraption.

“Watch where you're going!” Gregory yelled.

The man turned around for just a second, grinned and returned his focus onwards, angering Gregory even more. He didn't recognise the reckless driver but noted he had to be well-to-do, judging by his day attire.

“I've seen that fellow around,” Adam commented. “He's American like your lady.”

“She's not my lady,” Gregory snapped.

His friend grinned. “Slip-of-the-tongue.”

Another American in London? One was more than enough. “You say he's American?”

“Yes. He came here a couple of weeks ago. Also quite rich.”

Madeline was wealthy, and she had arrived in London several weeks ago. Was there any significance to the man being here? *Oh, stop looking for connecting dots where there aren't any. It's probably just coincidence.* Many Americans travelled to England yearly, so there wasn't anything suspicious there. *Although the others don't make such a nuisance of themselves like Miss Spencer. I wish I could get into her head and see what's going on.*

“Any idea what he's doing in England?” Gregory asked. “Is it business?”

“I don't really know, but I heard a rumour he followed a woman to England.”

Gregory pulled his face slightly. “Why? Who would follow a woman from America to England?”

“I don't have all the details, but I guess the fellow is in love. That emotion makes you do many things you wouldn't otherwise do. I would probably follow a woman if I loved her enough.”

The notion sounded preposterous to Gregory. “That makes him a poor sod, doesn't it? I wager the woman ran away from him, and he ran after her. Who is the woman?”

“I do not know, remember?” said Adam. “I just heard a few things here and there, but I can't validate any of them. The man might just be here on business, but someone decided to romanticise his stay. It wouldn't be the first time it's happened.”

That was true. People were fond of fabricating stories to make everything seem more scandalous or romantic. It was the very reason why Gregory was careful to keep himself from troublesome situations, but he appeared to be failing in that regard. Unless he put an end to the drama Madeline had caused, it would soon get out and cause mayhem. *That's the last thing the Duke needs.* But it wouldn't just be the Duke who would suffer, would it?

Madeline would also be on the receiving end of the people's disfavour. *Once they find out what she's trying to do, they'll ostracise her. The Ton does not take kindly to people trying to claim to be something they are not. They may have welcomed her into society, but an American claiming to be the Duke's dead daughter is not the sort of thing that will endear her to them.* Madeline was a nuisance, but he didn't want to see the *Ton* turn their backs on her. Social death was far worse than physical death.

"You've gone all quiet there," said Adam. "What are you mulling over?"

"Caring more about a person than I should," he said without thinking.

"So, you are interested in someone!"

Gregory snapped to attention. "What? No! That's not what I said. Don't put words in my mouth."

Adam narrowed his eyes. "But you said you cared more for a person than you should. You would never say that about your family, so who else could you possibly mean? Do you know what I think?"

"I suppose you're going to tell me whether I want to hear it or not," Gregory answered drily.

Adam snorted. "Speak for yourself. You're rather fond of giving out advice, but you hate taking it. Why don't you admit that you like someone and we can take it from there? There had to be a reason why you called me for a horse ride in the middle of the week. We're best friends, but not even I get to see you on a weekday unless by

appointment. You're always so busy either running after your business or running around your family."

Again, that was true. Although Gregory lived alone most of the time, he was rarely alone. With running the family business, newspaper and publishing business, the Duke's estate, and dealing with his sister's wedding, he barely had time for himself. *This business with Madeline doesn't make it any easier.* And yet, he hadn't felt as alive in the last few years as he had in these past weeks. Madeline ignited something within him, but Gregory had yet to decipher if it was good or bad.

"I did not call you here to give me advice," Gregory retorted.

"Ha! What's the use? You never take it," said Adam rolling his eyes. "So, why did you call me? Are we going to talk about nothing and just ride?"

"That was the idea."

Adam threw his head back, giving an exaggerated sigh. "Getting anything out of you is like extracting a stubborn tooth."

"Why would anyone wish to remove a stubborn tooth? It's obviously not ready to come out."

"Is this your way of saying you do not wish to talk about whoever is on your mind?"

Gregory gave a side smile. "There's a brain under that head of hair."

"Ha, ha," Adam mockingly laughed. "If you won't tell me a thing, I suppose we can play a guessing game."

"Must we?"

"Anyone who has Gregory Montgomery, Viscount of Blithely thinking about them, is worthy of mention. Now, who can it be?"

Gregory knew his friend would annoy him until he released the details he had been keeping to himself.

"Oh, very well!" he snapped. "I'm thinking about Miss Spencer."

Adam's eyes widened. "Indeed? She would have been my second choice."

"Who was your first?"

"Julia Sandton. You once paid her some attention."

Why did everyone have to bring up that woman? "That was done to get my mother to stop pestering me. I have no interest in Julia whatsoever."

“But you are interested in the American woman,” said Adam wiggling his eyebrows. “Frankly, you’ve surprised me. I would have thought you despised the woman. What has made you see her differently?”

I might as well tell the whole story. Gregory launched into a retelling of all the events of the past few weeks, starting from the very first moment he met her until the way things ended at the ball. Once he was done, Adam remained quiet for longer than Gregory thought was needed.

“So?” he pressed.

"Well," Adam began. "From everything you have said, it seems Miss Spencer stands a good chance of being Lady Russell, the Duke appears happier than he's been for a while, and you actually like the woman, but you deny it. You were rude to her at the ball because your mother gave you the idea she was married, which makes you a rude and jealous sod. Have I left anything out?"

His friend put it so simply that Gregory could only stare at Adam in silence. Gregory suddenly felt foolish for listening to his mother's gossip and giving Madeline the cold shoulder.

“We’ll have to cut our ride short, Adam. I have somewhere I have to be.”

Adam nodded knowingly. “You’re going to apologise to the lovely Miss Spencer, aren’t you?”

“It's the gentlemanly thing to do.”

The man laughed. “You keep telling yourself that, and perhaps you'll believe that's the reason why you're about to rush off. Isn't it interesting that we're already going the right way?”

Gregory ignored his friend as he urged the horse faster, but he could still hear Adam's laughter as he galloped away.

“I cannot believe I listened to Mother. The woman says many things that simply are not true, and this is likely one of them. If Miss Spencer was indeed married, I'm certain I would have heard about it by now.”

Gregory arrived at the townhouse sooner than he thought and was tempted to simply walk inside since it was his property, but it wouldn't do because Madeline currently rented it. He repeatedly knocked, wondering where the servants were. To his surprise, the man who had nearly run him over answered the door.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“Who are you?” Gregory demanded. “Where is Miss Spencer?”

“That is none of your business,” the man answered. “But if you must know, I'm Alexander Stratford, Madeline's fiancé.”

Gregory took a step back, alarmed by the twisting feeling in his gut.

Madeline was engaged? So, the rumours about why this man had come to England were true. *He was following Madeline.*

“I say!” the man exclaimed, looking Gregory up and down. “Are you all right?”

No, he wasn't. Gregory nodded. “Quite. I didn't realise Madeline was betrothed to another. She has never mentioned you before.”

“That's my Maddy,” the man said. “She tends to forget the most important things at times.”

“Oh, uh, congratulations,” Gregory managed to get out. “I do apologise for intruding quite suddenly. Will you please excuse me? I must go.”

Gregory didn't wait to hear the man's response, but ran to his horse, swung on, and rode off. His mother had been right all along! The only thing she got wrong was the actual time frame. Madeline was not yet married but engaged to another. Disappointment lay heavy on him, squeezing the breath out of him.

Gregory barely paid any mind to the people on the road as he rushed past blindly, not quite sure yet where he was going. He just needed to be somewhere, anywhere!

After a while, Gregory slowed his horse to a trot, keeping one hand on the reins as he wiped his face with the other.

“What's wrong with you, man?” he asked himself. “Why are you so upset?”

If Madeline was engaged, it proved that she was a liar, didn't it? Why hadn't she mentioned her fiancé when she had told the whole of England about her life?

“It seems to me to be something any woman would gladly announce.”

Madeline had once said that she had not managed to find the right man to settle down with, and yet the very man she was to marry was in her house.

“No! Not her house, but mine,” he spat. “She brought another man under my roof!”

What did that matter? She had paid for the townhouse and was entitled to entertain whomever she pleased.

“Calm down, you fool,” Gregory berated himself. “Think clearly about this matter. This is your chance to finally remove her from the Duke's life. Once I tell him about the little secret she has been keeping, he'll never again believe anything she says.”

Women who hid such significant news were not trustworthy. For all the good of this new development in the saga between him and Madeline, Gregory felt much fatigued. His shoulders slumped forward, causing him to hunch over the horse. Why did it feel like he had been sucked dry of all energy?

Perhaps I'm just tired and need a little lie-down. I'll be right as rain in no time at all.

Gregory wasn't paying attention to the direction he was going in, so was surprised when he found himself outside the gates of Montgomery House.

I might as well go inside.

A guard opened the gate, greeting him. Gregory could only tip his hat at the man. He didn't feel like doing anything else. Getting off his horse near the front door, he handed the reins to a stable-hand and prepared himself for whatever he would encounter once he stepped inside.

“I will tell them I do not wish to hear about wedding arrangements or any other gossip. I simply wish to rest.”

Perhaps he should have gone to his own house, but it was too late now. The servants had seen him and would inform his mother of his presence. Staten opened the door before Gregory got to it and took one look at his person.

“What the devil happened to you, my lord? You look terrible.”

Trust the butler to be brutally honest. “Such insolence usually gets you your marching orders, Staten.”

“You're free to fire me, my lord,” the man said with a little grin. “But it will come at the price of having the household fall apart in my absence.”

The cranky old thing is right. Gregory shook his head, returning the smile. “I take it my mother and sister are home?”

“As is Miss Sandton.”

Julia was here? Gregory groaned. He didn't want to see or speak with her today. “Is it too late to turn back and run?”

“I would only do that if I didn't mind the consequences.”

Gregory sighed. “I suppose you're right. My mother wouldn't take too lightly to me suddenly leaving without seeing her first.”

Staten opened the door further. “Shall I get you a brandy, my lord?”

“Yes, please. I'll take it in the parlour. I assume that's where they are?”

The man nodded. “As per usual.”

“Thank you, Staten,” said Gregory, lightly cupping the man's shoulder before entering the house.

He could hear the women's chatter from the hallway, making him regret every footstep he took towards them.

“Heaven help me.”

The second he entered the room, the chatter died down. Gregory saw Henrietta was also here, stuffing her face as usual.

“Good day, ladies,” he greeted.

“What a pleasant surprise, son,” his mother exclaimed. “We were just talking about you.”

What was new? “Oh?”

The Viscountess tilted her head to the side, frowning. “Gregory, what on earth is the matter with you? You don't seem yourself.”

Was it that obvious? “Nothing at all, Mother. I find myself somewhat tired today. Perhaps my ride with Adam was more tiring than I thought.”

“Well, if that's the case, why don't you take a seat? We were just

discussing what you are doing about the Miss Spencer situation.”

That was the last thing Gregory wished to discuss. “If you don't mind, Mother, I would much rather talk about something else.”

“But what could be more important than getting rid of the woman?” his mother argued.

“She'll be out of our hair soon. There is no reason to worry about the matter.”

His mother's eyes widened. “Indeed? How so?”

Gregory felt a headache coming along and decided he could not bear to sit amongst the women. *I might as well tell her the truth about Miss Spencer and let her mull over that.*

“Miss Spencer is betrothed, Mother. Once I inform the Duke of the matter, he'll realise that if she can lie about not being betrothed or married, she can lie about anything else. I'll make him see reason. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to lie down.”

“But, but-” his mother began.

“Please, Mother,” Gregory interrupted. “I need some rest right now. Excuse me, ladies.”

As Gregory climbed the stairs to his room, he tried to understand one thought churning his insides to butter. His world seemed to be crumbling, and he had no notion why.

Chapter 19

Julia wanted to leap off her chair and yell 'victory!' to the heavens, but she resumed drinking her tea, watching the expressions of the other women with barely concealed delight. *This could not have gone better even if I'd planned it! Who knew such an opportunity would come about?* Madeline Spencer would soon be out of Julia's hair, and she hardly had to do anything to make it happen. *Perhaps I did do something at the ball, but it was nothing compared to finding out she has a fiancé.*

Julia had done an exemplary job of planting seeds of doubt in the minds of the women at the ball. No one appreciated an upstart or a commoner claiming to be anything but a commoner. It didn't matter how beautiful or wealthy that person was; the Ton didn't take kindly to people like Madeline Spencer lying about her identity. *I whispered in a few women's ears, and they did the rest.*

Julia had watched the women spread the gossip around the ballroom like wildfire until almost everyone was aware of Madeline's intentions. *I would say I did them a favour by warning them about Miss Spencer. I wanted to laugh when I noticed how they began to ignore her. The poor woman looked so bewildered by it all, and it didn't help that I had stood on her foot.*

That had been a stroke of genius! Julia had seethed with anger when she witnessed how engrossed Gregory had been with Madeline. The two had stared at each other and almost missed their cue to swap partners, if not for Madeline's partner nudging Gregory.

Julia had been so overcome with hostility towards the woman that she had stood on Madeline's foot the second she was within range. *I didn't bother apologising. I wanted her to see that I did not like her.* Julia had

been worried Gregory might ask Madeline to dance once again, so taking her off the dance floor had seemed best. *Her foot must be the size of a cantaloupe.*

“Julia, dear, are you listening?” asked Lady Blithely.

What did the woman want now? *I'm enjoying my thoughts.* “Yes, my lady? Forgive me, I have a lot on my mind.”

The woman's eyebrows rose. “More important than what we just found out about Miss Spencer?”

“Not at all, my lady. I was simply thinking about how relieved Gregory must feel that he will soon be rid of Miss Spencer.”

The Viscountess grinned. “It's a wonderful turn of events, yes? I didn't have the greatest confidence in the plan you had put together, but it seems we'll no longer need it.”

Julia's jaw tightened a smidgen. The Viscountess had not had confidence in her plan? *That was not what she had said when I first told her of it.*

“We can take it as the cherry on the cake,” Julia explained. “I already spread the rumour about who she is claiming to be, and now when everyone discovers she is betrothed, they will believe the words I told them. Miss Spencer will be a hated individual once she leaves England.”

And good riddance to that. Julia couldn't wait for the day Madeline would leave Gregory's property and get on the first ship bound for America.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," the older woman agreed. "The more people know about her, the more detested she will be by all."

"Is it all necessary, Mama?" Marcia asked. "I do not think Miss Spencer has done something so hideously terrible to deserve the hatred of the Ton. Perhaps she genuinely believes she is the daughter of the Duke."

Julia wanted to slap the words right back into Marcia's mouth, but if the woman was to be her sister-in-law, Julia had to be careful. *Not if, but when. I will become Lady Blithely; it is only a matter of time.*

"Do you wish Miss Spencer to remain in England and take your brother's inheritance?" her mother demanded.

Precisely so! Julia wanted to shout, but she let the Viscountess handle her daughter. *Once I am the new Viscountess, I'll be able to put these fools in their place. I am sick of pandering to them and pretending I adore them.* The first thing Julia would do is reduce the amount of money and attention Gregory gave to his mother and sisters. *I'll make him understand that we need everything for our own family. After all, I'll be carrying his heir and a few spares.*

"That is not what I said, Mama," Marcia denied. "I have every confidence Gregory would have found the information to prove Miss Madeline is not the Duke's dead daughter come to life. I merely do not find it necessary to ostracise her from society. She is rather fun."

Fun? I'll give the imbecile her 'fun' as soon as I marry her brother. She'll never say such a stupid thing again. What makes Miss Spencer fun, anyway? She's just an annoying loud creature who enjoys the attention of everyone. Well, she made a great mistake the day she decided to come cross Gregory's path.

“Fun or not, dear, she must go,” the Viscountess insisted. “I'm sure another entertaining individual will come along, and we will all eventually forget about Miss Spencer.”

Henrietta, who had been calmly stuffing her face throughout the discussion, gave an unladylike burp and looked at everyone, challenging them to say anything. Since she was pregnant, Henrietta believed she had the right to do just about anything in the presence of women. Julia knew the pregnant woman would never do such a thing in front of her husband.

“At the risk of putting a damper on your high spirits,” Henrietta began. “But what if Gregory is wrong?”

“About what?” the Viscountess asked.

“About Miss Spencer being a betrothed woman. What if he heard the wrong information? Now, I may not know the woman well, but I cannot believe she would hide such a significant part of her life and then simply let it become public knowledge. Miss Spencer is far too intelligent for that.”

Julia wanted to pick up a scone and hurl it at the woman's mouth. What sort of nonsense was she spewing? *Does she wish to take away my*

joy?

"Your brother is far more intelligent," said Julia sweetly. "I daresay he discovered the truth and pursued it until he was able to find the proof. If he says Miss Spencer is betrothed, I am inclined to believe him."

"Julia is right, dear," the Viscountess added. "Gregory has been trying to remove Miss Spencer from the Duke's life, and he finally has the solution."

"He didn't seem terribly happy about that solution," said Henrietta.

Julia glanced at the woman sharply. What was that supposed to mean? The pregnant woman was clearly implying something.

"He must be tired, Henrietta," the Viscountess replied. "Your brother has been working such long hours, and this matter involving Miss Spencer and the Duke must have been stressful. It's only right that he be tired."

Henrietta shrugged. "Perhaps my womanly senses are spurting all over the show, but I do suspect Gregory might carry a *tendre* for Miss Spencer."

Julia spat her tea out and watched in horror as the milky liquid landed on the table, the carpet, and her dress. Everyone became still, staring at the mess. *It will be a miracle if I am not thrown out of this house.*

"F-forgive me, my lady," Julia stuttered, wiping at her dress. "I do not know what came over me."

"I know precisely what came over you, dear," said the Viscountess.

Julia couldn't tell if that was a good or bad thing. "You... you do?"

The woman turned to her Henrietta, fixing her daughter with a stern eye. "Do not repeat anything so foolish, Henrietta. Do you hear me? Gregory could never feel anything for that American woman. It's preposterous."

"Oh, Mother!" said Henrietta impatiently. "I have only been married for two years, and yet I seem to know more about the male mind than you do. Miss Spencer is a unique and captivating woman, and that is a lethal combination for any man. She's also beautiful, has her own wealth and is capable of commanding an entire audience of men and women. You said that yourself at her dinner party. I say this in no offence to Julia, but Gregory does not seem to be drawn to ordinary women. Have you not noticed how he speaks about Miss Spencer every day?"

Julia did take offence to the notion that she was an ordinary woman. *How dare she say such a thing about me?*

"Your brother has been trying to get rid of Miss Spencer, Henrietta!" the Viscountess scolded. "Of course, he will have cause to regularly discuss her. I've spoken about her as well."

"But that is different," Henrietta argued. "You are a woman, and he is a man. Men only speak greatly on things that interest them or 'tis not worth their attention. Furthermore, my dear brother appeared rather devastated when he entered the parlour earlier. Shouldn't he be happy Miss Spencer will no longer be a thorn in his side? If she ever was?"

Julia did not like what the pregnant woman was saying. Not at all. Could Gregory be interested in Madeline? *No, no, that's not possible. Gregory despises her! He could never have a tendre for Miss Spencer.*

"Watch your tongue, Henrietta," her mother advised. "I know 'tis the pregnancy making you speak such foolish words. Your brother and Miss Spencer can never be and will never be- that is all there is to it. Why would he wish to be with that horrible American when Julia is right here? She is the better woman for him."

Julia smiled into her cup. The tea had turned cold, but she didn't mind. *She's finally speaking sense! I might as well start planning my wedding at this rate.*

"Mama is right, Henry," said Marcia. "Julia is far more suited to Gregory than Miss Spencer ever will be. Could you imagine having her as a sister-in-law? I shudder to think of the humiliation we would suffer."

The woman shuddered for effect, looking to her mother, who nodded approvingly.

"You know I do not like to be called Henry, Marshy," Henrietta complained, delicately dabbing at the corners of her lips. "I suppose we shall wait to see who is wrong. I do not mind being wrong, but if I'm right..."

“You are not right,” the Viscountess insisted. “It's only a matter of time before Miss Spencer leaves and your brother courts Julia. We should do everything in our power to push Gregory towards the right woman instead of saying ridiculous things.”

I am glad I came across them today. Julia had been talked into going to the shops with her aunt and the woman's annoying dog. She had spotted Lady Blithely and Marcia coming out of a fabric shop, their arms laden with parcels. Naturally, Julia had offered to help, and they, in turn, had invited her home for some tea. Aunt Josephine had gone on ahead, and Julia had left with the Montgomeries.

It was worth it carrying those heavy fabrics and accessories. You would think a Grand Duke's daughter was marrying instead of the daughter of a Viscount. Lady Blithely wishes to make it the wedding of the year, and I suppose it will be. That's unless I manage to marry Gregory this year, then I shall be sure to make my wedding grander. Julia wanted to make a point of showing everyone that although she was the last of her first Season's group to be married, it had worked out for the best. How many of those girls could boast marrying a well-respected Viscount with two inheritances? Yes, one girl had married an earl and the other a duke, but Gregory was more affluent than them, and that counted for something. *I daresay Gregory could buy both their estates!* Oh, it was going to be wonderful being the lady of the house.

Julia must have been smiling too much because all eyes were on her once again.

“I'm sure the tea isn't that good,” Henrietta commented. “In fact, it must be rather cold. You've been nursing that one cup since I arrived.”

I wish she wasn't here! The pregnant woman had come to see her mother and sister soon after they had deposited their parcels into the hands of waiting servants and sat down for tea. *Henrietta always seems to know when it's time for tea. Her pregnancy must be a sort of internal clock.*

"I am but worried about your brother," said Julia. "He seems quite drained, which is no doubt a result of making sure Miss Spencer does not take advantage of the Duke. Perhaps now that he has proof, his fatigue has finally caught up with him."

That had been the first excuse off the top of her head, but the more Julia thought about it, the more it seemed possible. *Henrietta is barking up the wrong tree by assuming Gregory is interested in that horrid woman. A man like him would never suffer the presence of such a woman unless he has to.*

"Indeed?" Henrietta asked, a little smile playing about her lips. "Well, I certainly hope so for all your sakes."

"Come, come, now, dear," the Viscountess chided. "Leave this train of thought, and let's focus on the matter at hand. Miss Spencer will soon leave England or face humiliation, and your sister is getting married. This should be a joyous occasion."

Henrietta smiled as though she was simply humouring her mother as she nodded, biting into a sandwich.

"It will be as you say," the woman said around a mouthful of bread and cucumber.

Julia grimaced, putting back the scone she had just picked up. It was time for her to go anyway, and the sooner, the better. Julia had much to think about now that she had a clear path to winning Gregory over. Now, she had to ensure he noticed her and saw her as a suitable wife. *I cannot allow him to slip away from me. Miss Spencer is no longer an obstacle; thus, there is no barrier to becoming the next Lady Blithely.* Unless Julia counted Gregory as the barrier, but once Marcia was married, he would look more closely at suitable women, and she intended to be at the forefront of it all.

Setting her cup on the table, Julia moved to the edge of her seat. "Lady Blithely, I simply must go home to my aunt. I did not mean to stay out so late, and I am certain she is asking for me."

"Of course, dear. I'll have Staten bring the carriage to the front."

The Viscountess did just that, seeing Julia off, which was rare for the woman. As Julia got further and further away from the house, she happened to look up at the sky and noticed dark clouds gathering in the east.

"If Aunt Josephine were with me, she would say 'tis a bad omen about things to come. That cannot be true in my case. Nothing can go wrong from this moment on."

Despite her positive words, Henrietta's telling of the situation between Miss Spencer and Gregory remained in Julia's head.

Lydia only decided to come outside and see Julia off to clear her head and get away from all the ideas Henrietta was planting in her head. She walked away as soon as the carriage took off, heading in the direction of her prized flowers. For some years now, she had been

trying to copy the garden the Duchess of Claverset had created during her five-year marriage to the Duke, but without much success. Although her flowers were beautiful and artfully arranged in the garden, they lacked vision and creativity.

“That young woman was always better than everyone else. I'll never forget how my own husband praised Hyacinth as though I were nothing more than chattel.”

The Duchess had been ten or eleven years younger than Lydia and a raving beauty by anyone's standards. For the past twenty-odd years, Lydia had forgotten about the woman, but with Madeline's arrival, everything had been brought to the surface again. Lydia hadn't immediately recognised who Madeline resembled, but something about the woman had niggled at her.

“I had a feeling of knowing her despite meeting her for the first time.”

It was when Gregory informed her of who Madeline was claiming to be that it finally struck Lydia. Madeline looked just like Hyacinth! However, Lydia knew that couldn't be. The Duke had not spared any resources in finding out about his wife and daughter, only to be told that they were most definitely dead.

"When Magnus passed away, I mourned him as any good wife should, hoping that once I come out of my mourning period, I might gain the attention of the Duke."

But the man had only had eyes for his late wife. Hyacinth had not even loved him, but the foolish man had held onto her memory as though she were some angel.

"At least the man took my son under his wing. Gregory has proven himself to be indispensable and worth everything the Duke has promised him."

Everything had been going well until Madeline arrived on the scene. Now, Lydia was forced to consider if the woman was indeed the Duke's daughter. It didn't seem possible for a person to come back from the dead, but how else could one explain Madeline and the Duchess' uncanny resemblance? However, Lydia had eventually brushed that to the side and convinced herself it was mere coincidence. That was going well until she began to notice how attached Gregory seemed to be to the woman.

"At first, I believed it to be annoyance, but eventually, I realised the annoyance was hiding something else brewing beneath the surface."

Although Lydia had denied it, she too had a feeling what Henrietta had claimed was true. Oh, she didn't want it to be correct at all, but Lydia couldn't deny how her son's interest was fixated on that American woman.

"I keep hoping it is but a phase, and soon he will grow out of it, but based on his demeanour today, I would say he has a *tendre* for Miss Spencer."

Had the American seduced her son? Lydia didn't know. Her motherly instincts were telling her that Madeline matched her son in every way except class, but if she were the Duke's daughter...

"Oh, I do not know what to think! I wish that woman had never set

foot in England. I detest having to think so much.”

Massaging her temples, Lydia sat down on a tree stump. The situation was getting out of hand, and she had no clue how to fix it.

“I can only hope Miss Spencer will truly leave once confronted about her lies.”

If the woman were lying. That had been another worry. Was her son so overcome with emotion that he had misread the situation? After all, Gregory had investigated Madeline's background and had come away with nothing nefarious. How was it that a fiancé could simply turn up out of nowhere?

“There has to be more to this story. It would be easy to consider this matter sorted, but my instincts tell me otherwise.”

If Madeline was indeed the Duke's daughter, then it was truly a miracle. If the woman felt about Gregory the way he felt about her, there would be no need to worry about the Duke's inheritance because Gregory would still get it through marriage.

“I hate not knowing all the details. The truth must come out, or Miss Spencer simply has to leave and never look back.”

Lydia's future comfort depended on it.

Chapter 20

Bathing a dog as big as Hippocrates was not as challenging as some might think. The real problem was Lemony; the monkey hated baths. Madeline stared at the pet, shaking her head.

“You gladly prance about in the rain, but now you chatter at me in your monkey language as though I'm committing some crime against you. Would you like me to call Jeremiah?”

Lemony's jabbering immediately died down, but he continued to defiantly stare up at Madeline.

"Do not give me that look, young man," she scolded. "I will call Jeremiah here, and he can bathe you. He'll have you walking a tight rope in no time at all."

Jeremiah was gentle with animals, but he was also firm and did not take any nonsense. Madeline's pets sometimes took her for granted and tried to get away with some things, but they never dared with the manservant.

“I suppose you wouldn't be fussing so much if I hadn't bathed you three days ago.”

All Madeline's pets had received a good scrub after a spontaneous moment in the mud, but boredom and a need to keep her thoughts at bay led to another wash day. Poor Lemony probably believed he was being tortured, which was not what Madeline had intended.

Lifting the unhappy monkey out of the tub, she dried him down and gave him a kiss on his head.

“Sorry, boy. Mama's a tad high-strung lately. Will you forgive me?”

Lemony chattered away, pulling Madeline's hair to bring her face closer. She bent down, nuzzling her nose in his wet fur. Moments later, Lemony set off undoubtedly to warn his other siblings what possibly lay in store for them if they didn't hide.

“I suppose I've become somewhat a tyrant since the night of the ball. Alexander has not made it any easier.”

In no uncertain terms, the man had stated that he would not take no for an answer, adding to Madeline's growing stress.

"If it's not one thing, it's another. I suppose I should get out of these wet clothes and ready myself for the noon meal.”

Or perhaps she should bathe. Madeline was likely full of spittle, fur, and who knew what else. She met Rebecca on her way up to her bedroom, hearing the woman chuckle when she saw Madeline's state.

“It looks like you were trying to give Brody a bath and failed.”

Brody was one of their more high-spirited bears who preferred to run into the river than receive a good wash. Oft times, Madeline had been the one to receive a bath instead of the bear.

"Let's just say Lemony had had enough. Would you please send up hot water to my room? I do not wish to smell like a wet monkey for the rest of the day."

"Why not? It might just be the perfume you need to repel Mr Stratford."

Madeline groaned. "Oh, Becca, don't remind me about him. Not today. It's sheer luck that he has errands to do today, or I might have been forced to spend another afternoon with him. I cannot understand why Aunt Dianne likes him so much. It can't just be about his physical features, can it?"

Rebecca laughed. "Your aunt does love a handsome face, and Mr Stratford certainly is one good-looking fellow. However, I cannot decide between him and Lord Blithely. Which man do you prefer?"

Madeline pursed her lips, crossing her arms. "I see you're full of amusing notions. You wish for me to choose between a man who refuses to leave me alone despite countless requests and another who calls me a liar and treats me however the wind blows his sails. Is that about correct?"

"Goodness! I was talking about their appearance, not their character, but I suppose that might be all the same to you, in the mood you're in. Why don't I get that water going?"

Rebecca hurried away without another word, glancing once behind her before moving a little faster.

“I guess I'm driving everyone away these days,” Madeline grumbled. “Even Becca cannot stand to be in my presence for too long.”

If only this irritability would go away! Stomping up the stairs, Madeline wrenched her bedroom door open and slammed it behind her, wincing when she remembered the townhouse was not her home. However, recalling that it belonged to Gregory gave her some satisfaction.

“I wish I had never met the likes of him. He has made me as confused as a mouse served a piece of cheese from a cat's paw.”

Did men like Gregory exist to disturb the peace in a woman's life? To think she had begun to believe he wasn't as terrible as she initially thought him to be.

A week had passed since Madeline clapped eyes on Gregory, but she convinced herself he was busy. However, that argument had not stuck because occupied or not, she and Gregory had always managed to cross paths several times a week. Could Gregory's absence have anything to do with his sudden changed behaviour at the ball? Her heart told her yes.

“I refuse to dwell on these thoughts and emotions! There are far better things to do with my time.”

However, no matter how hard Madeline tried to keep any Gregory-centred thoughts at bay, they would creep up on her like vines up an old cottage.

“To think I had been willing to look past his ill-informed opinion about me on account of the man he revealed himself to be.”

Gregory had shown Madeline another side to him. He had ceased to just be the man who had interfered in a father and daughter reuniting, and had shown himself to be a man who respected women, one who was indeed interested in Madeline's thoughts and opinions, and who held her interest like no other man before him had.

“My heart softened around him despite all my warnings, and now I'm left with a horrible feeling of...”

Madeline did not even know what to call it. Confused, disheartened, disappointed, hurt, listlessness- these were all the feelings she had churning within her at speed. If only her feelings had healed as fast as her foot had. Madeline still walked with a limp, but the physician had assured her she would be right as rain in no time at all. He advised her to keep off her foot for two weeks, but that would mean having far too much idle time.

Going against the physician's wishes, Madeline had kept herself busy writing letters, sketching, painting, playing the pianoforte, taking her pets for walks, accompanying her aunt to the shops, and tending the garden Gregory had left neglected. Aunt Dianne's ankle no longer pained her as much as it did before, but she carried her walking stick, nonetheless.

“Likely to give it to me if she feels I'm on the edge of falling over.”

The physician recommended that Madeline use a walking stick to take the pressure off her foot when walking about, but she had refused. Papa had taught her the best way to recover was to go about as usual, albeit more slowly. He was not one to sit about doing nothing.

"I wonder how the Duke approaches challenges. I might never have the opportunity to find out because Lord Blithely continues to insist I'm merely an imposter."

Her life in England would have been easier if he hadn't become involved. However, she had to admit that Gregory had made it easier in other regards like providing her with a townhouse, getting the services of an excellent seamstress, and... What else had he done? Their conversation on the way back from the teashop had been wonderfully fresh and meaningful. That had also been the moment Madeline had seen more to Gregory than just the demeanour he portrayed to her. That had to have been the turning point.

"I should have refused his carriage and insisted on finding a coach to take us home. I was already vulnerable around him!"

Madeline couldn't explain it, but something about Gregory had made her take notice of him from their very first meeting. Even after he had all but thrown her out of the Duke's house the very first time, something within her had looked forward to their meetings.

"It was counterproductive, but there you go."

It was times like these Madeline missed her mother. She would have

known what to do in situations like this.

“Come to think of it, she is the reason why I am in this situation. Had she not hidden such a vital part of my life, then...”

Then she never would have had the world's greatest Papa or brothers she adored. Madeline wouldn't have had the life she enjoyed in America, and she would have never had the freedom to do all she had achieved thus far. There seemed to be far more rules in England than she was accustomed to, and they chaffed her.

“Perhaps 'tis really time to go home. I haven't achieved much, and now I appear to have been ostracised by some members of the *Ton*.”

Madeline still didn't know what was going on, but she had noticed how some women refused to stand and speak with her or invite her to their homes. Invitations had all but dried up, and while no one was particularly rude to her, they weren't warm either. Madeline knew it had to do with the ball, but she didn't know what had transpired to sway people's opinion of her.

“I tried to find out, but no one was willing to explain the sudden change.”

It was frustrating, to say the least. Rebecca came in some moments later with two servants carrying her bathwater. Her abigail seemed to know just what Madeline needed because her water smelt like lavender oil, which worked great to soothe her. An hour later, Madeline felt better and refreshed as she made her way downstairs. She was momentarily taken aback when she entered the parlour to find Camilla chatting to Aunt Dianne. When had the woman arrived?

“Camilla, I didn't know you were here.”

"I came half an hour or so ago but asked Rebecca not to inform you until you were done with your bath. I always tell my husband that a woman's bath is one of those scared moments that must never be disturbed. Do you feel better?"

Madeline raised her eyebrows as she looked at her aunt, who looked away to fiddle with the frill of her sleeve. It seemed the older woman had been talking a tad too much.

“Oh, do not be vexed with your aunt, Maddy,” said Camilla. “She knows I'm concerned about you and simply wished to inform me of some trouble you've been having lately.”

Taking a seat, Madeline wondered if it was acceptable to talk about her problems to Gregory's cousin. After all, they were related. *Camilla has never given me a cause to doubt her sincerity, but I do not wish to have any of my matters make their way to Lord Blithely.*

“Merely some challenges,” Madeline answered vaguely. “How are you? I think I last saw you before the ball.”

"Yes, that is why I decided to come and see you and also to ask for a favour."

“Oh?”

"I have some shopping to do today and would love some advice and company. Would you come with me? I promise we will not take above two hours."

"That sounds like a wonderful idea, dear," said Aunt Dianne. "You need to get out of the house for a little while."

Madeline frowned at her aunt. They had just gone shopping a few days ago, and she regularly took her pets out for a walk. Why would she need to get out of the house?

"Oh, please," Camilla begged. "It's always more entertaining when you come with me. It's challenging to find another woman with similar tastes and a great eye for fashion and homeware. I wish to give my house a little change with a few scatter cushions here, perhaps some vases, draping, and whatever else catches my eye. My husband has finally agreed to let me do it, and I simply cannot do it alone."

Madeline wanted to ask what Camilla would have done if she had not been around, but she bit her tongue. Perhaps it would be good to go out with a woman close in age and spend some time away from everyone at home. *They probably need a little reprieve from me!* Besides, Camilla was a wonderful person, and Madeline enjoyed being around her.

"A day out sounds good," she finally said. "I should probably start buying gifts for my father, brothers, and friends, or I'll never get it done in time."

"Do you plan to leave England soon?" a surprised Camilla asked. I

thought perhaps you'd wait until the Season ended."

"I miss my family," Madeline simply put. "And I never intended to be here too long."

Madeline left out all the troubles she had had with Gregory and the Ton. *I haven't told Camilla about the Duke being my father, but I suppose it'll come out eventually.* However, it wouldn't come from her lips.

"Oh," said Camilla, clearly disappointed. "I understand. I would probably miss my family as well if I was away from them for weeks and months. When do you plan to leave?"

"I still have to decide that, but likely soon. I think I have received all that England had to offer me, and now I want my own home country."

Although I was born in England and spent my first three years here.

"I'll be sad to see you go, but at least we can make the most of what time we have together by leaving for the shops right now. Are you ready, or do you wish to change into something else?"

Madeline looked down at her simple muslin dress. It was a light blue and in a style more suited to staying at home, but she wasn't trying to impress anyone now, was she?

"I'm fine with this dress. I'll just get my reticule and parasol, and I'll be back in a moment. Will we take your carriage or mine?"

Tired of hiring carriages and waiting for them to come to pick her up, Madeline had bought one and hired a driver. The seller agreed to purchase the carriage from her once she was ready to leave England. Madeline would have no need of it in America.

"We'll take mine if you don't mind."

Madeline nodded, quickly leaving the room to collect her items, and met Camilla outside the front door.

"All ready?" the woman asked, smiling.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

Madeline meant that. She no longer knew what to expect from England, her birthplace. People burned hot and cold without a moment's notice, and Madeline had grown tired of it. At this point, her motto was 'whatever will be, will be.'

It was over two hours into their shopping trip when Madeline realised Camilla had not ceased to talk. It was a welcome distraction, but it was becoming excessive. *Do I usually talk this much?*

"I'm not certain what Aunt Lydia is doing pairing Gregory with Julia," she heard the woman say.

Madeline's ears focused on what the woman had just said, waiting for more information on the Viscount.

"I do not think they suit at all, but Gregory has a mind of his own," Camilla continued. "Do you believe that they can enjoy stimulating subjects together? I doubt it."

Gregory was with another woman? Why did that information cause an ache in her heart? *She must be the woman who danced with him at the ball.* The woman had also been the one to step on Madeline's foot. Had it been a warning to stay away from Gregory?

"What do you mean by pairing?" Madeline asked, trying to sound normal.

"Aunt Lydia would like my cousin to court Julia. I'm not certain what Gregory has decided, but from what I've heard, he is seriously considering it."

Madeline put her hand on her chest as she felt the ache increase in intensity. What was wrong with her? *I have absolutely no right to him! It should not matter to me if he is courting another woman.* And yet it did, painfully so.

"Are you feeling unwell?" asked a concerned Camilla.

"Yes, yes, quite well. I think I just ate something earlier today that didn't agree with me."

Oh, why did I decide to come to England? Why couldn't I leave things alone? Mama must have had her reasons for leaving this world behind and starting a new one. Madeline had been a fool to chase a forgotten life. I have a wonderful world in America where people love me and don't hurl false accusations. I don't have to deal with a Duke who cannot decide whether I'm his daughter or deal with a man who my heart has softened for yet belongs to another. Madeline had made a colossal mistake.

"You do not look well," Camilla insisted. "Why don't we sit for a while? I'm certain we can find somewhere—"

"No," Madeline interrupted. "I assure you I'm fine. Why don't we finish our shopping? I only have a few things to get, and I'll be done. How far are we on your list?"

Camilla still appeared worried, but she pulled out a folded piece of paper and went down the list.

"I'm glad we managed to find the right shade of drapes and the vases I was looking for. I still have tea sets, scatter cushions, and muslin material to buy."

Madeline didn't know if she had enough energy to go into all those shops and still buy her last few items. They had already gone over the two hours Camilla had first promised, and since hearing about Gregory and Julia, Madeline didn't have the heart to be around people for much longer. *Perhaps I do need to sit down and rest. I might feel better after a little refreshment.*

"I've changed my mind. Let's find a tea shop and..."

Madeline's voice trailed off as she saw Gregory and Julia coming their way. The couple hadn't noticed them yet, but it was only a matter of time. Her heart thumping painfully against her ribcage, she turned away, her hands clenched around her parcels.

"Why don't we go to that clock shop? I think I might need a pocket watch for Papa."

"But I thought you bought him a silk necktie?" Camilla questioned.

Why did the woman have to argue with her? "I will get him an extra gift as an apology for leaving him. I haven't been away from home this long before, you know. Come, you can help me find the right one."

Madeline took a step forward but paused when she noticed Camilla's eyes drift to the couple Madeline had tried to avoid.

"I didn't know Gregory would be out with Julia today," the woman commented.

"They must be busy. Let's leave them alone and continue with our shopping," Madeline urged.

"But they're looking our way and coming to us," Camilla argued. "We cannot turn away now."

I certainly can! But Madeline didn't. Instead, she turned back to Gregory and Julia, holding her breath as the couple approached them. It didn't escape her attention how handsome he looked today.

"Gregory! Julia!" Camilla exclaimed. "How surprising it is to find you here."

Madeline remained silent, looking at the space between Gregory and Julia. She noted that it was relatively wide but likely for propriety's sake. *I daresay they would be holding hands if not for the public.*

"Gregory and I crossed paths but a moment ago," Julia replied. "I see you're shopping today. Have you had a successful day so far?"

"I would think so," Camilla replied. "You're usually at the offices this time, Gregory."

"I know, but I decided a walk would be more welcome. You're looking well, Miss Spencer. How is Mr Stratford?"

Madeline's head jerked up, her blood thundering in her ears. *He's addressing me like there's nothing wrong.* Somehow, that made her feel worse. It took a few more seconds for Madeline to realise he had spoken about Alexander. *How does he know Alexander?*

"He's well, my lord. I was not aware you knew him."

"I briefly met him the other day," said Gregory.

He did? But when? Not even Alexander had mentioned Gregory. *But where would they have met?* Madeline watched as Julia shot her an indecipherable look before she laid a hand on Gregory's arm and leaned in slightly.

"I must return to my aunt, Gregory," the woman said. "We promised we would only walk a few paces away from her, but now I cannot see her. She must have lagged behind."

Why do I have the notion Julia is marking her territory? The woman had stood on her foot, and while Madeline had tried to explain it away as an accident, she knew better. The fighter within her wanted to confront the woman there and then, but fear of what Gregory might think doused her fires quicker than a lightning strike.

Clearing her throat, Madeline pasted on a smile. "We have to get going as well. Camilla and I still have shopping to complete. It was lovely seeing you both."

Madeline didn't wait for a response but walked right past Gregory and Julia, hoping Camilla would follow without question. She held her head up high, but her limp stopped the graceful walk she had tried to keep. To her horror, tears began to fill her eyes, but Madeline wasn't sure what they were for. Was it the injustice of the whole situation? Seeing Gregory with Julia? Her failed mission to reunite with her father? Madeline didn't know, but it hurt all the same.

Gregory watched Madeline limp away, nearly calling out for her to stop. However, Julia's hold on his arm reminded him that he could not run after another woman while the one he was meant to give attention to was beside him. *I should have never agreed to run an errand for Mother. She knew Julia would be here and hoped I would run into her.*

Gregory's mother had been talking about how wonderful it would be to have Julia as a daughter-in-law. Unfortunately, she had said it to too many people, and now rumours were abounding that he was courting Julia.

"Maddy is right," said Camilla. "I asked her on this shopping trip, and we've already taken more time than I promised."

"Why is she limping?" he asked.

"She was injured at the ball. A clumsy woman stepped on her foot and actually broke her skin. Poor Maddy had to contend with a bleeding foot until she got home."

"Let your cousin go, Gregory," Julia insisted. "Miss Spencer is getting further and further away. Her injury must not be so terrible if she can walk so quickly."

"Julia is right," said Camilla. "I must catch up to her."

Gregory watched his cousin hurry away, his mind perplexed. *Miss Spencer was fine when I left her. When did the injury happen?* Further shame filled him at the way he had treated her at the ball. Had he not acted so coldly towards her, he might have been able to help her. The thought of Madeline being in pain wrenched at his insides, squeezing his heart tight.

"Aunt Josephine must be wondering where we have gotten to, Gregory," said Julia.

Worrying about Miss Spencer almost made me forget that I'm with Julia. It was foolish of him to get so caught up with concern for Madeline when she was engaged to another. She didn't deny knowing Alexander, so I suppose I received my confirmation about the nature of their relationship.

“Gregory?” Julia pressed.

“My apologies. My thoughts were somewhere else. Shall we go? Your aunt must be looking for you.”

They eventually found the woman in a hat shop, happily trying on ridiculous creations. *Why women wear such things on their head, I'll never know.* Gregory was finally able to get away with the excuse he needed to get back to the office. As he returned to his carriage, he couldn't help but look around to see if Madeline was still nearby.

“Pathetic,” he murmured.

He never stood a chance with her, and yet he couldn't keep himself from seeking her out.

Chapter 21

Madeline lifted her foot in the air, wriggling her toes. The bluish hue was almost gone, and she hardly felt any twinges of pain now.

"I told you I would be as right as rain, Aunt," she said. "We Spencer girls are made of hardier material."

"That's good, dear because I've invited a guest for lunch."

Madeline put her foot down in a hurry, wincing as she jarred it. "You didn't!"

"He's lonely, dear," her aunt argued. "And we're the only people he knows."

"But that was by choice! No-one stopped him from acquainting himself with others."

Groaning, Madeline turned onto her belly, putting her head down. Today had started out so lovely with breakfast in the garden, a little time in the sun while she took the pets on their daily stroll, and now once again stretched out under the biggest tree on the property. Why did her aunt have to ruin it? *It has been one of the best days since coming to England. Seeing Alexander will undoubtedly put a damper on everything.*

“Why not be nice to him, dear? He treats you so well and-”

“Aunt Dianne, please! Do not try to recommend the man to me. I know precisely what Alexander is all about. He doesn't love me at all, but the idea of us as a couple. We would clash at every moment as a married couple, and I would never be free to pursue my own activities. He'll demand I play the obedient wife and parade me about town as his trophy. That is not a life I wish to have.”

The older woman huffed, setting her teacup on the garden table. “Why are you so adamant he is the wrong man? Perhaps he will be the best husband for you.”

Did her aunt not hear a word she had been saying? “No, Aunt. When you know, you know. Alexander and I are not suited for each other.”

"You are so stubborn when you want to be. The man is smitten with you and simply wishes to please you."

“By forcing me to adhere to his standards,” Madeline argued. “Didn't you listen to him the last time he was here?”

Alexander had talked at length about what their lives would be like once they were back in America. He expected her to remain at home and take care of the household while he went to work. That wasn't such a problem to Madeline because she understood the duty of a wife to her husband, but Alexander had spoken about getting rid of all the animals, selling her property or leasing it out to interested parties, and bearing children as soon as possible. There had been no talk about what she wished to do or how she saw her future. This, amongst other things, was a red flag.

"Yes, I heard him well enough, dear, but all men are like that. They like to know their wives will be at home after a tiring day at work, and he understands you will not be able to run your own personal estate while taking care of your home. He was only thinking about you."

Is that indeed how her aunt had seen it? "You're too busy looking at his face and charming ways to understand what he was saying. No wonder Grandad had to keep you locked up."

As a young girl, Aunt Dianne was infamous for falling for a great smile and smooth charm and had to be observed lest she elope with one of the many men out to get her inheritance. A good man finally came into her life, and fortunately for her, he had been handsome. *For all her intelligence, Aunt Dianne becomes as malleable as wet clay in the hands of a beautiful man.*

"Do not remind me of that," her aunt asked. "I do not recall telling you about that period of my life."

Madeline smiled. "You didn't have to. Aunt Clothilde told me all the details about it."

The woman looked skyward. "She would. It has been well over twenty-five years, and yet she still uses that against me."

"What do you think she would say if she knew you were pushing me to accept Alexander's proposal knowing full well we are not right for each other?"

“But you do not know that for certain, dear,” Aunt Dianne insisted. “Alexander might be the best husband any woman could ever ask for, but your judgements are clouding your view. Simply give him a chance without your preconceived misconceptions, and then decide. Can you at least do that?”

Madeline covered her eyes with both hands. “You're driving me to insanity, Aunt.”

“I'm simply broadening your horizon. Everyone who meets Alexander tends to like him. He's charming, polite, caring, not to mention wealthy. At least you know he's not a fortune hunter like some of the others.”

Madeline could give him that. Alexander's family was nearly as wealthy as hers, but she didn't like the idea of their affluence coming off the backs of their slaves. The Stratfords had several plantations in the south and owned hundreds of slaves. Once, she and Alexander had gotten into an argument about the inhumanity of owning a slave, and he had concluded it with the words 'in capitalism, all is fair as long as you make money.'

It was an attitude most people had, but that didn't condone treating other people like mindless cattle. *Although he did promise to free their slaves if I married him. I don't know how authentic his promise is, and I cannot help but think there is a clause to what he said. I cannot see the Stratfords hiring people to work their plantations when they are accustomed to free labour.* Perhaps with the right influence in his life, Alexander might change his mind.

“Since you are insisting so much, I will give him one last opportunity to prove he is not the type of man I loathe.”

“Loathe is such a strong word, dear,” her aunt objected.

“Detest, then.”

Aunt Dianne sighed. “It's not any better, but we'll leave it at that. Why don't you freshen up for lunch? Perhaps a pretty dress, a flower or two in your hair, and some of that lovely French perfume your father bought for your last birthday.”

“You want me to do all of that for Alexander? Certainly not! He'll start to get ideas. I will, however, freshen up because I do feel a little grimy and hot.” Madeline stood up, dusting her clothes. “I shall see you in the next hour or so. Is that ample time before Alexander arrives?”

Her aunt nodded. “More than enough. I'll ask Rebecca to set up the dining room for our meal. Cook has already come up with a fabulous menu.”

Aunt Dianne had evidently been planning this lunch for some time. *I don't even have the energy to be angry.* Since seeing Gregory the other day and finding out all the terrible things people had been saying about her, it had taken everything within her not to give up and run for the hills. Madeline had been waiting for Camilla to come out of a flower shop when she overheard women talking about her. *They accused me of being a low-class American upstart looking to fool a helpless old man.* That had been one of the more civil remarks.

Madeline didn't know how these women had come to know about the reason why she had come to England, but the truth had been twisted

so that she sounded like a villain. *Is that what happened at the ball?* Madeline also had to consider the possibility that Gregory had informed the guests of the information, which would explain why people became so cold towards her. *Would he do that to me?* Her heart told her no, but her mind forced her to consider the circumstances. *But this would be the quickest way to get rid of me, wouldn't it? He had acted strangely later that night, and I-*

“Dear, shouldn't you be going?” said Aunt Dianne.

Madeline was actually glad to be interrupted. Considering that Gregory had purposefully humiliated her to get rid of her was not doing her any good.

“You're quite right,” said Madeline. “I'll see you in a little while, Aunt.”

As soon as she was away from Aunt Dianne, Madeline's thoughts began to spin with the new conclusion her mind had come to. If what she was thinking was true, then going home would happen much sooner. She had already looked at possible departure dates and given herself at least another month, but at this rate, one week was too much. *There is a ship departing in a few days. I might just be on it.*

Alexander was his usual pompous but charming self as he lounged back in his chair, grinning at Aunt Dianne.

“Delicious meal, Mrs Abbot. My English cook is nowhere near as good as yours.”

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, Alexander. Perhaps you and Maddy can take

a slow walk to settle your bellies? I always find walking aides indigestion."

"Then you can walk with him, Aunt," Madeline said sweetly.

She already had had enough of Alexander and did not want to be alone with him for even a second.

"Oh, no, dear," Aunt Dianne refused. "My ankle has been feeling somewhat tender this morning. I may have overworked it yesterday."

Madeline raised her eyebrows. *She had been fine this morning.* "I'll call the physician."

"No, no, there is no need for that," the woman said quickly. "It just needs to be rested. You two should go ahead, but not too long, mind you. I do not want people saying my niece is galivanting about the place, unchaperoned."

"Rest assured, Madeline's honour is my honour, Mrs Abbot," Alexander replied.

His smooth ways never cease to amaze me. Where does he store all that gag-worthy charm? Sighing, Madeline pushed away from the table.

"We might as well get this over with as soon as possible."

“Madeline!” her aunt chided. “That is no way for a lady to speak.”

"You're right, Aunt. I should have said, 'would you mind picking up the pace so I can fulfil my aunt's request?' Did that sound better?"

Aunt Dianne placed her head in her hands, shaking it. Alexander, on the other hand, got to his feet and held out his arm.

“Shall we? I don't want to keep you too long.”

He was finally making sense. “I know the quickest path to ensure I'm home in under fifteen minutes.”

“Twenty, surely,” Alexander argued.

“I can take it down to ten. Fifteen or nothing.”

“Fifteen it is. Come along.” Alexander all but pulled her out of the house, stopping at the end of the gate. “Which way?”

“Left, and then left again. The path takes us around this lot of townhouses and back here.”

He nodded. "Let's go. I have many things to say and apparently not enough time to say it."

“We could have just stayed in the house.”

“No,” said Alexander. “I need privacy for this.” They walked for a few paces before he spoke again. “Tell me, have people been treating you strangely lately?”

Madeline's eyes widened. “You were the one who told everyone why I was here!”

“Of course, not!” he denied. “I wouldn't stoop that low, Maddy. Even you should know that. I heard several people talking about it the other day. They called you a few terrible names, and I felt led to defend your honour.”

Madeline groaned. Alexander defending her would likely worsen the situation.

"Oh, no. What did you say?"

"That they were barking up the wrong tree. You don't need that old man's money or the title that goes with being his daughter. What do titles matter to us? We're Americans, and we pave our own way."

Madeline had to admit she was impressed at how Alexander had come to her defence. *Perhaps he is not all that loathsome, but he certainly is not marriage material.*

"Did they listen?"

"No." Alexander coloured. "They were more content to believe the worst of you, which is why I must insist we return to America. Why stay among a bunch of people who do not think highly of you? There's a ship leaving for America in three days, and I've already bought tickets for everyone. All I need is your consent, and we'll leave this wretched country. They don't deserve you, Madeline. Come back home with me." At this point, Alexander stopped walking and took her hands. "Everyone you love is an ocean away. People here do not understand you, or they would have known those rumours were wrong. It's time to cut your losses and go. Say yes, and we can start packing right away."

Madeline looked at her limp hands in his, knowing that Alexander was making sense. *I didn't achieve what I set out to do, and despite looking like Mama, my own father will not accept me. I thought he would have recognised me and not listened to anyone else. Wouldn't his heart have shown him the truth?* What of Gregory? *He has hurt me the most, but it was all my fault. Why did I allow my heart to grow fond of him?* It had all happened so quickly, but Madeline had seen it coming. It really was better to go where she was loved and leave England far behind just as her mother had.

Madeline bit back a sob, blinking her eyes furiously. "You are right, Alexander. It's time to go home. I'll start making arrangements to leave in three days."

"Yes! Yes!" Alexander exclaimed. "I knew you would see it my way. You'll see this is the best decision for you, Maddy. Once we are home, everything will seem better."

She hoped so.

Madeline could kick herself for choosing to come here, but her heart wouldn't have felt settled if she had left without saying goodbye.

"Was this necessary, dear?" asked Aunt Dianne.

"We won't be long, Aunt. I think it only respectful to personally inform Lord Blithely of our departure."

"Very well, but I shall wait in the carriage."

That's what Madeline had hoped she would say. "I have no qualms with that. I'll be back before you know I'm gone."

Madeline climbed down the carriage and walked straight up to Gregory's home. Camilla had informed her he was staying with his family because they had Marcia's soon-to-be in-laws as guests for the week. Madeline hoped Gregory would agree to see her at the door so she wouldn't have to see anyone else.

Madeline raised her hand, but the door unexpectedly swung inwards, showing Gregory in his riding habit.

"Miss Spencer," he said frowning. "I didn't expect to see you there. What brings you to my home?"

Madeline drank him in for a moment, soon chiding herself for the weakness. Clearing her throat, she stood a little taller.

“I’ve come to inform you that I’ll no longer need the use of your townhouse, my lord. I’ll be leaving tomorrow. However, I will pay what was agreed upon, and-”

Gregory held his hand up. “There is no need for that, Miss Spencer. Pay me what is due for the time you spent in the house.”

Madeline felt her heart sink. *He’s not asking why I’m going. He really does not care about me.*

“Certainly. Good day, Lord Blithely.”

Madeline swung around and marched down the path to the waiting carriage. She held her tears in until she made it to her room and locked the door behind her. Only then did she sink to the floor and give in to her pain.

Madeline decided the best way to return Gregory’s keys was through Camilla. Their last meeting had been disastrous, or at least, it had been for her. Jeremiah and Rebecca had gone on ahead to the ship, but she and Aunt Dianne were making one last trip to the only real friend Madeline had made in England.

“I’ll only take a minute, Aunt,” Madeline assured. “I know we’re running a tad late, but Alexander assured me the ship would not set sail without us. What’s an hour more?”

"Go ahead, dear. Try not to become too emotional, or we'll never leave this place. I'm looking forward to being home once again."

"I promise you that we will leave today. I have nothing holding me back in England."

Madeline kissed her aunt's cheek for good measure and ran up the path to Camilla's front door. People looking out of their windows probably thought her odd, but what was strange in the face of being an upstart? *I'll take odd any day.*

Molly answered the door, immediately taking her to where Camilla was playing the pianoforte. The woman stopped when she saw Madeline, her eyes clouding with tears.

"I cannot believe you are leaving so soon," the woman complained.

Yesterday, Madeline had sent Camilla a letter giving her the briefest of details about her departure and coming to return the house keys.

"It's for the best. I've been in England long enough to know I want to go home."

"But you only saw London!" the woman protested. "I hoped you would accompany my husband and I to our country home once the Season ended. It's much grander than this house. I assure you England has much more to offer you, Maddy. Stay awhile."

Madeline shook her head. "It's time I go home to my family. You've been a great friend, Camilla, and I'm glad to have met you. Perhaps you'll come to America, and I can take you to all the best places in town."

Camilla sniffed. "I suppose that will have to do. Hand over the keys before I decide to take you hostage."

Laughing with just a hint of misery, Madeline dropped the keys into the woman's palm. There, it was done. She no longer had any ties to England. The women embraced each other warmly, promising to see each other soon.

Finally, it was time to go. Madeline had hoped against hope that she would see one more glimpse of Gregory, but that wasn't to be. *I suppose this is for the best.*

Chapter 22

Gregory had had enough of entertaining guests. Granted that they would be his sister's in-laws soon, they appeared to be more interested in the Duke than their daughter-in-law.

“If I hear one more question about how big the Duke's estate is or what do I stand to inherit, I might throw them out of the house.”

It was just as well that he needed to go into the office today to oversee their next news instalment.

“My lord,” said Staten. “Your horse has been brought to the front.”

“Thank you. Please inform my mother I'm leaving and only expect to be home for the evening meal.”

The old man raised his eyebrows. “Running away so soon? I'm certain your mother expects you here as the man of the house.”

“Wouldn't you run away with that sort of people living in your house? Marcia's chap seems to be a good fellow, but his parents are atrocious. Besides, I have work to do. I can't have everything fall apart to entertain that lot. My mother and Marcia will be ample entertainment while I'm gone.”

“If you ever come back,” Staten added.

Gregory chuckled. "You know me too well, old man. Well, I'm off for some peace, and hopefully, I'll find an excuse not to return."

Staten opened the door for him, bowing as Gregory walked out. He could see the older man wanted to say something else, but the man knew his place. *He wishes to know about Miss Spencer, but I do not want to speak about her.* There were too many complicated emotions involved, and Gregory didn't want to get into them. He wished he had met Madeline under different circumstances, but wishful thinking never got anyone anywhere. The fact remained that she was a liar and betrothed to another. Gregory couldn't stand liars, and yet he couldn't ignore how Madeline had gotten under his skin. Something had been brewing between them, something significant and capable of changing his entire life.

"Forget about all that now. There is no use dwelling over such things."

Gregory took his horses reins from the stable hand and was just about to climb on when he noticed his cousin's carriage draw up to the house.

"Camilla?"

His cousin usually didn't come to see him so early. It was only nine in the morning. Gregory gave the reins back to the stable hand and met his cousin as she climbed down the carriage.

"I hoped I would catch you before you left for the office," said Camilla. "I figured by now you would have made excuses to leave

your guests.”

"It seems both you and Staten know me all too well. What brings you here?"

"I wanted to give you the keys to your house and mail that came for Maddy. Since you own the house, I thought it best to bring it to you. Maddy is probably at the docks boarding her ship at this very moment. She came rather early to give me the keys."

Camilla handed both over to his open palm, observing his face. What did she expect to see?

"Thank you. I trust everything is in good order?" he asked.

"If you're asking about the condition of the house, then I assure you it's in even better condition than when Maddy moved in. She knows how to run a household. She'll make a wonderful wife one day."

There was that look again. "If you have something to say, say it."

Camilla shrugged. "What could I possibly have to say other than the fact that I think you're a fool for not pursuing Maddy? I thought you made a lovely couple."

Was his cousin not aware of Madeline's betrothal? "What utter nonsense, Camilla. Miss Spencer and I would have never suited."

“What a shame,” said his cousin, sighing. “Now she has to spend a considerable amount of time on the ship with that annoying man.”

Was she talking about Alexander? Why would the man be annoying if Madeline was to marry him?

“Which man would this be?” Gregory questioned.

“Alexander Stratford. He has been trying to convince Maddy to marry him, but she doesn't like him at all. I've never met a more insistent man. He is actually the one who finally convinced Maddy there is nothing to look forward to in England, which I completely disagree with. I'm rather sad to see her go.”

None of this was making any sense to Gregory. He rubbed his left temple, frowning at his cousin.

“I don't understand. The man personally informed me he is Miss Spencer's fiancé.”

Camilla laughed. "What? He has a fine cheek to spread such lies. No, they are most certainly not engaged to be married. Perhaps he hoped Maddy would say yes, but she truly does not like him in that way. Of course, he has his good qualities, but they do not suit at all. As I said, you and Maddy would have suited perfectly. At one stage, I thought something was happening between you, but I suppose I was wrong. Oh well, I have to go. My poor husband has an upset stomach and made me promise not to be out too long."

Gregory bid his cousin goodbye, watching her carriage drive away until it disappeared. He was stumped. Madeline wasn't betrothed after all.

“None of this is making any sense. If she is not married, then...”

Then he had been wrong about her. She hadn't lied about being unmarried! Gregory groaned, rubbing his brow.

"I mistreated her without verifying what the man said. But how was I to know he was lying? He was in her house, for goodness' sake! What else was I supposed to think?"

Gregory looked at the letter in his hand, turning it over. It was from America. It was probably a correspondence letter, but something told him to open it. Gregory was not one to pry into the privacy of others, but he couldn't help but feel the envelope in his hand was somehow significant. Ignoring his conscience telling him what he was doing was wrong, Gregory opened the letter, surprised when a locket fell out. It looked rather old, although well taken care of. Curiosity had him opening the latch on the side, revealing the little painting inside. Gregory froze. He had seen this picture of a mother and child before.

“It's the same one in the Duke's study, but that one is larger.”

What could this mean? Gregory's heart thumped loudly as he pulled the folded note out, his hands trembling.

My Dearest Maddy,

I was not sure what to include to prove who you are, but I did find this locket amongst your mother's belongings. Perhaps it will help prove to the Duke that you are his daughter, although I must admit I'm not quite ready to share you yet.

I want you to know that your mother loved you and only wanted the best for your life. She left your father because she was worried you would end up like her- young, married to a much older man, and unhappy. It must have taken great courage to board that ship, knowing she could have been caught at any moment, but she risked it for you. I doubt she would have done it if she had not had you in her life. She would have continued to be the Duke's wife and remain unhappy for the rest of her life. Your mother never wanted marriage in the first place. Her uncle forced it on her because he wanted access to the Duke's coffers. She had just been a child when she lost her parents and was left in the countryside to be raised by servants and governesses. Imagine her great shock to be informed of her pending marriage to a man older enough to be her father? The Duke had also been married once before, and your mother always felt she was living under the shadow of the first wife.

Your mother was so full of life when I met her. I instantly fell in love with her, and when she introduced me to you, I knew that I wanted to be your father. You were the sweetest creature I had ever seen, and I just wanted to protect you. I might have asked your mother to marry me within a week of meeting her, but she didn't agree until I knew everything about her past. She didn't want our marriage to be filled with secrets. I knew that I was marrying a married woman, but I didn't care at that point. I merely wanted you and your mother in my life. I didn't care that she was the Duchess of Claverset or changed her name from Hyacinth to Francesca. It didn't matter to me that you were Lady Russell, and your name had once been Charlotte. To me, your mother was my wife, and you were my daughter. Giving you my last name has been one of the greatest moments of my life.

I hope you will forgive me for keeping all this information from you. I was afraid you would leave me and cease to think of me as

your Papa. Your brothers and I miss you terribly, as do everyone who love and adore you. Please come home soon- this house is not a home without you.

Love Always,

Your Papa

Gregory clenched his hands together, bringing them to his forehead. "What have I done?"

Madeline had been telling the truth the entire time, but he had been too blind to see it. Not only was she not engaged, but she was also the Duke's daughter and rightful heir.

The Duke instantly knew she was his daughter. His heart told him so, but I kept telling him Miss Spencer was an imposter. I didn't want him to trust her.

Gregory had done it out of concern for the Duke, but had his concern clouded his judgement as well? Madeline was the spitting image of her mother, for goodness' sake! How could anyone fake that?

The truth was right in front of my eyes, but I refused to see it. I didn't want to see it.

When he got to know her better and discovered the type of woman she was, he should have re-evaluated his initial beliefs about her.

She never hid anything from me, not once, and how did I repay her? I treated her abominably and judged her without any evidence to uphold my beliefs. A true gentleman does not do that.

Madeline was now on her way home, never having reunited with her father, and would probably never wish to set foot in England again.

"I drove away the Duke's daughter and the only woman I've wanted to be around."

What was he going to do now? It was no use just standing around! Gregory swung onto his horse and headed to the Duke's house at breakneck speed. The man deserved to know what he had newly discovered before Gregory could make any other decision about this knowledge.

Gregory didn't know how much time passed before he finally made it to the Duke's house, but it still felt far too long. The horse had hardly come to a stop before he jumped off it and ran into the Duke's home.

"Your Grace!" he shouted. "Your Grace!"

The Duke's butler came hurrying towards him, concern etched over his wrinkled face. "Lord Blithely! What has happened?"

"The Duke! I must see the Duke! Where is he?"

“Right here, young man,” said the Duke. “What on earth is the matter? Why are you yelling like that?”

The Duke slowly walked towards him, his back slightly bent today. *It must be his back injury paining him today.* Several years ago, the man had slipped and hurt his back while taking a walk out in the dead of winter.

“Your Grace, please forgive me. I made a colossal mistake, and I don't know if I can fix it.”

“There's no such thing as a mistake that cannot be fixed. What is the problem?”

At that moment, shame and guilt clogged up his throat. Gregory hung his head, handing the locket to the man.

“This might explain everything,” he managed to get out.

The Duke frowned as he took the item, turning it over in his hand. “This looks familiar. Whose is it?”

“Open it, Your Grace. The answer lies inside.”

The man did as Gregory asked, dropping the pendant to the floor as soon as he saw the two figures inside. Gregory wanted to get it, but the man held out his hand and bent down, catching the locket to his chest. He held it like that for a few moments before manoeuvring the

latch and pulling out a lock of hair.

“Where did you get this?” the Duke demanded. “My wife never took this off her.”

“It came in the mail for Miss Spencer. It was accompanied by a letter.”

“A letter? Let me see it,” the man asked gruffly.

Gregory could tell the man was trying not to cry, but his voice said it all. He handed the letter over, turning away so he could give the Duke some privacy. He was startled when he heard a heavy thud on the floor, spinning around on his heel to find the Duke on the floor.

“Your Grace!” Gregory shouted, heart in his throat.

He ran to the man who swatted his hands away. “Leave me! It's just a fall, you fool! Where is she? Where is my daughter?”

The Duke had never used that tone on him before, but it was within the man's right to scold him. After all, he had kept Madeline from the Duke.

“She's on a ship to America.”

“She has left already?” the man asked weakly.

"I don't know, Your Grace. Camilla informed me the ship sets sail today and-"

"Then I must go to her! She might not have left yet."

"But Your Grace!" Gregory argued. "Your condition."

"What about it?" the man snapped. "My daughter, who I believed was dead, was right in front of me, and I couldn't even embrace her. I got my daughter back, Gregory! How can I lose her again? I won't, I tell you! You either help me get to her or get out of my way. You've been in the way long enough."

The Duke's words cut at him, but the man was right. "I'll get the carriage ready."

Gregory turned away, hurrying to the stables. Within five minutes, they were on their way. Both men remained silent, but Gregory knew he had to clear the air. Even if the Duke never forgave him or spoke to him again, he had to explain his side. Sighing, Gregory rubbed the back of his neck as he looked for the words to say.

"I didn't mean to keep a father from his daughter, Your Grace."

"I know that."

“You do?”

“I’m not a fool, young man. I know that you were only trying to protect me from heartache. You were right there with me when all those women came and tried to convince me they were my wife and daughter. I wouldn’t have been able to get through those times if you had not been by my side.”

Although Gregory was relieved the Duke wasn’t going to kick him out of his life, the man still had to be angry with him.

"I know, but I got it wrong this time despite the uncanny resemblance between mother and child. I should have used my common sense instead of immediately calling her an imposter. I was just afraid she was just another imposter who looked like the Duchess and used it to her advantage. I was afraid she would ruin your life. In the process, I ruined both your lives."

The Duke laughed miserably. “Don’t take all the credit, Gregory. I had a part to play in this as well, you know. I’m not some senile, helpless man who cannot think for himself. I saw my daughter, and I knew in my heart who she was, but fear kept me from fully giving into that belief. I wanted her to be my daughter, but I was afraid that one day it would be revealed that she isn’t my daughter. I don’t think I could have taken another blow like that.”

They fell into silence again, both looking out of the window. *If we manage to get to her before she leaves, what will I say?* He would have to ask for her forgiveness, but Madeline was well within her rights to withhold it. Madeline had done nothing but tell the truth and be herself, and he punished her for it. It was bad enough to hurt someone he wasn’t particularly fond of, but to cause pain to a person who had come to mean something to him? Gregory simply had no words to

describe his remorse.

"If you pity yourself anymore, you'll end up throwing yourself from a moving carriage," the Duke commented.

"Am I that obvious?"

"You've never been one to hide your strongest emotions. They tend to show on your face and in your body language. You're worried about what my daughter is going to say to you, aren't you?"

The Duke was already referring to Madeline as his daughter. It was such a smooth transition that Gregory didn't think the man quite realised it yet.

"She might not be happy to see me. I haven't been kind to her at all."

"Let's focus on stopping her and convincing her to stay, and we can think about the rest. I just want my daughter with me. I've been alone long enough."

Oddly, Gregory felt the same way. He had been alone long enough, but he had kept himself from thinking about finding a wife. Meeting Madeline had pushed him to consider his future, although he had stopped short of thinking about a future with her. Why would he when he had been adamant she was an imposter? *But that didn't stop my feelings from growing, did it? I had to struggle between chasing her off and wanting to be near her.* Now that Gregory knew he no longer had to keep Madeline from the Duke, he still couldn't consider Madeline as anything but the Duke's daughter. *I've done far too much damage to*

have her see me as anything but the man who hurt her. An inexplicable sadness settled over him, crushing him under its weight. No, focus on reuniting the Duke with Miss Spencer, and forget the rest. He had to.

Chapter 23

Madeline was pleasantly surprised when she and her aunt made it onto the ship with more than an hour to spare. She added a few cubes of sugar and milk in a cup before giving it to her aunt.

“You were so worried we wouldn't make it, and yet here we are.”

“Time must have slowed for us,” said Aunt Dianne. “I honestly thought we would just make it. Perhaps I looked at the time wrong.” The woman took a sip of her tea, sighing. “I'm glad we're taking several English teas home. If there was one thing I enjoyed about England, it's their love of good tea.”

Madeline laughed. “Admit that you did not trust me to keep time, Aunt! Anyway, Alexander promised to hold the ship if we were late, so there was no need to fuss so much. I know that you wish to go home, so do I. Would you like a biscuit?”

Their English cook had tearfully baked a tin full of buttery treats for their journey.

Her aunt nodded, accepting the biscuit. “I know that you miss America, dear. I suppose I was worried you might change your mind and wish to stay.”

“Even if I did, I would never expect you to stay with me. I would have asked Camilla to chaperone me.”

Aunt Dianne put a hand on her bosom, her eyes widening. "Do you think I would leave you behind? I would never do such a thing! Imagine what your father would say. He would accuse me of abandoning you. Richard would never forgive me for that."

"Papa would have eventually gotten over it and perhaps come to England to fetch me. But there's nothing to keep me here, Aunt. All the people I love are across this ocean."

"No one at all?" her aunt asked cryptically.

"No one. I am disappointed I never had the opportunity to speak with my father or find out more about Mama's life, but perhaps this was how it was meant to be. She left England for a reason, and I must honour that."

"Your mother left England under different circumstances, which I am thankful for, or I would have never met my niece. However, I can understand your disappointment, as well. The Duke is your father at the end of the day, and this country was part of your mother's life for twenty-two years. It's natural to want to know everything that happened here. It would also be natural if you developed a *tendre* for an English gentleman. I always thought you would settle with a foreign man, although I always hoped a good American boy like Alexander would catch your fancy."

A tinge of colour appeared on Madeline's cheeks. "Well, I did not develop such a thing for any gentleman. Thank goodness for that."

Aunt Dianne sipped her tea slowly, arching her eyebrows as she

watched Madeline over the rim of her cup.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” asked Madeline.

“Well, I didn't want to say anything before because of all the challenges that were thrown your way, but I cannot help but wonder if anything happened between you and Lord Blithely.”

“What? No! Of course, not!” Madeline denied. “Why on earth would you imagine such a thing?”

“Call it a hunch, dear. I know you had your conflicts regarding the whole Duke drama, but Lord Blithely brought out a spark in you that lit up your eyes. No other man has been able to do that. I admit I was selfish because I didn't want to acknowledge what I saw happening between you. I was worried Lord Blithely would take you away from us, and we would return to America without you.”

Is that what had been going through her aunt's head all this time? *No wonder she was pushing me towards Alexander!*

“Oh, Aunt. I would never leave you or my family over a man! I'm not that kind of woman.”

“But all girls eventually leave their homes, dear. I just didn't want you to be an entire ocean away from us. That was terrible of me, I know.”

Madeline set her cup on the table and went to her aunt's side. "What a

silly goose you are, Aunt. My home is in America with all of you. Besides, nothing went as planned here, so that must be fate telling me that there is nothing for me in England."

"But what if I've kept you from love?" her aunt asked teary-eyed.

"Nonsense! Perhaps I'm just meant to be alone."

Aunt Dianne took Madeline's face in her hands. "Do not ever say that, dear. I want to see you happily married with children. I know you can live a good life alone, but no man or woman is meant to be alone. And don't tell me about having your family – it is not the same thing as having your own family."

Madeline closed her hands over her aunt's. "If it happens, then it happens. However, I'm not going to pause my life just wait for the right man. He'll have to come into my life while it's busy and make himself known."

"And if he has already?"

"He hasn't," Madeline affirmed.

Her heart told her she was lying, but she wasn't going to pay attention to that. She needed to move on.

"But what if he has?"

“Then he will come after me,” Madeline said simply.

Aunt Dianne sighed. “Stubborn girl. Perhaps I should have said something earlier and given you the chance to see if Lord Blithely is the one.”

“He's not,” Madeline insisted. “He can't be.”

Not after how he had treated her. *He became indifferent towards me in the end, and that is worse than any other emotion.* Part of Madeline had hoped Gregory would ask her to stay when he knew she was leaving England, but his expression had been as deadpan as they come. *I'll eventually forget about Lord Blithely and focus on my life back at home.*

Aunt Dianne eventually changed the topic and became happier as she spoke about seeing her pet duck and her family members. Madeline was just as excited, but there was a bit of a damper on her happiness. Her failed mission was a hard reality to swallow, but her family would make it all seem better once she was reunited with them once again.

“I think your father will throw a welcome back party as soon as we land, dear,” said Aunt Dianne.

“As long as he doesn't go about doing the same thing he did last time. I will personally throw Alexander to my wolves if he attempts to propose to me before our guests. I've had enough of his antics.”

“I still think he's rather charming and would make a good husband.

Lower your standards a little, dear.”

Madeline choked back laughter. “Were you not the one just talking about meeting the right man?”

“That was then; this is now.”

“But it was mere moments ago, Aunt!”

“Yes, but I was emotional then,” her aunt replied as if that explained everything. “I don’t think you’ll get anything better than Alexander, dear. No man has pursued you as keenly as he has. Why don’t you at least agree to a courtship? That’s not saying yes to marriage, but yes to getting to know each other better.”

Madeline had a feeling her aunt would not leave the subject alone until Madeline agreed to at least something.

“Why don’t I think about the courtship on our journey home? I cannot promise more than that.”

“That’s rather stingy of you, but I’ll accept it for now. You will not mind if I give him some advice on how to handle you?”

Madeline raised her eyebrows. “Handle me? Am I a horse?”

“You know what I mean, dear. You're a handful for any man, and they need help if they have any hope of impressing you. Just a few pointers here and there should not hurt.”

“That would be cheating,” said Madeline.

“Everyone has to study for a test, dear. Poor Alexander has not been given the study material to know what you're about.”

“Fine, fine,” Madeline acquiesced. “But what if he still fails? Will you let the whole matter rest?”

Her aunt nodded. “I will gladly step back and let you do as you please.”

That sounded good to Madeline's ears because Alexander would definitely fail the test even with inside help.

“Agreed. May the best man or woman win.”

“It's not a contest,” Aunt Dianne reminded.

"Semantics, my dear aunt." Madeline frowned as she realised the ship should have started moving by now but hadn't. "I think I should go and see why we haven't set sail yet. I'm sure the departure time has come and gone."

“You do that, dear. I think I'll take a nap. Wake me up when we start moving.”

Madeline left their luxury room, running into Alexander as he left the captain's cabin. *Of all the people to come across. I wondered how long it would take before I saw him.*

“Oh, Maddy! I almost bumped you over.”

“It's fine. Do you know why we haven't left the harbour yet?”

A look of irritation passed over the man's face. “There has been a delay with the cargo. They're waiting on a load of rations for the journey.”

“Oh, I see. Thank you.”

Madeline turned away, but Alexander quickly called out to her before she could take her first step.

“May I speak with you a moment?” he asked.

Sighing, Madeline turned back. “Is it anything you've already discussed with me?”

"As a matter of fact, yes, but it still needs to be addressed. Now that we're going back home, I wondered if we could discuss our betrothal."

"But we're not engaged," said Madeline.

"I know that, but we could be. We could become engaged now and hold our wedding as soon as we get to America. Think of how happy our families would be."

Alexander beamed at her; his perfect teeth bared. Madeline didn't mean to, but she began to mentally compare the two men as she observed Alexander. Gregory's teeth were not as straight or white, but they did have more character. *Perhaps Alexander is a tad broader in the chest, but not much. I did feel comfortable in Gregory's arms but awkward in Alexander's.* Both men were stylish, but Gregory was more conservative. *I might find myself competing with Alexander in the fashion department.*

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm thinking of a future with you, and I don't think it will work. We're far too different. Now, I know people say that opposites attract, but I do not believe that. You have to have some things in common."

"What do you mean?" asked a confused Alexander. "We're alike. We have the same background, social status."

"All superficial similarities. We don't share the same interests, you don't respect my work, and you wish me to change for you, but you're not willing to do the same. Our marriage will not work."

Alexander laughed. "That's ridiculous! My parents are as different as chalk and cheese, but they have been married for years."

"Are they happy?"

He paused. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Just as I thought. I have tried to be polite to you and I've been rude at times, against my nature. Now, I frankly do not care what you think about me. You have been annoying and persistent, so I'm telling you for the last time- leave me alone or..."

"Or what?" he asked.

Madeline tried to think of the scariest thing, but again, that wasn't her nature to issue threats. *I have to tell him something.*

"Or I'll tell everyone that you are not to be trusted and leave their imaginations to run wild as to why that is."

Alexander's eyes widened. "You wouldn't."

"I wouldn't want to find out. Now, if you'll excuse me, I want to enjoy the view."

Madeline walked away from him, going to the opposite end of the ship. Fortunately, it looked out to the sea and not land. *I've had enough of England and Alexander.* Staring out, she noticed a pod of dolphins frolicking in the waves. They jumped in and out, flipping over each other with such synchronised action that not one of them bumped into each other. Sailors always spoke about dolphins bringing good luck to a trip, which Madeline hoped was true because she didn't need anything else to go wrong.

Madeline's peace was disturbed when she heard a commotion somewhere behind her. Frowning, she turned around, repeatedly blinking when her eyes revealed something her mind refused to believe.

Is that the Duke and Gregory hurrying my way? It cannot be.

And yet they were coming closer and closer to her, their expressions a mixture of relief and anxiety.

I'm leaving England! Why have they followed me?

For one crazy moment, Madeline considered running away and locking herself in her cabin, but that would seem foolish, wouldn't it?

"I presume there will be a confrontation of sorts," she muttered.

The men finally drew up to her, slightly out of breath. Madeline stared at them, not knowing what to make of their sudden appearance.

“Is there any reason why you're on a ship bound for America?” she asked.

“I don't want you to go,” said the Duke. “I can't lose you again.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I know you're my daughter, Charlotte, or rather, Madeline. I know you're my daughter, and I can't tell you how happy I am to say that.”

Madeline looked to Gregory, expecting him to say something against it. *He's the one who never wanted the Duke to believe who I was.*

“It's true,” Gregory confirmed. “You were right all along.”

Madeline was officially confused. “I'm right? Well, of course, I'm right, but why are you admitting it? What changed? Oh, what does it matter?! I'm going home where I belong. I'm tired of England and all the drama that came with it. No wonder my mother left! I should have never come here, but I thought that meeting my father would finally close this unknown chapter in my life. Evidently, I was wrong.”

“No, you were not,” the Duke insisted. “We were the foolish ones who didn't see what was right in front of us. Will you forgive an old man for his stupidity?”

Madeline saw the fear in the man's eyes. He was clearly worried she would say no, and part of her wanted to. What was Gregory thinking? He had been the one intent on proving her wrong and turned the *Ton* against her. *He won't even meet my eyes! He must be ashamed of his actions, but I don't understand how they concluded that I'm right and they were wrong.*

"When did you decide I'm your daughter?" she asked the Duke.

"Camilla brought me a letter addressed to you," Gregory responded. "I read it and found out you were telling the truth. Your father included a locket that belonged to your mother. It was all the confirmation we needed."

So, her father did manage to send the proof, but was it too little too late? *I've suffered enough. I don't want to relive my experiences.*

"You read a letter addressed to me? Why not just ignore it? That way, you could have maintained your belief that I was lying to everyone. That would've been easier."

Gregory winced. "I must admit that I was wrong to intrude on your privacy, but I'm glad I did, or I would have never known the truth."

The Viscount appeared remorseful and wouldn't quite meet her eyes. The Duke, on the other hand, didn't take his eyes off her. It was almost as though he was scared that she would disappear before his very eyes. *I suppose I can understand that. He believed Mama and I perished at sea, and now he's worried something else might happen.* Like returning to America. What now? She was already on the ship, and she wanted to go home. *If things had been a little different, I might have*

wished to spend time with the Duke, but I just don't think that's possible anymore.

"I'm glad my name has been cleared, but unfortunately, I'm on my way home, so there's not much we can do about this new development. I hope you both have a good life."

The Duke put his arm out, stopping her. "Please, wait. Don't leave, child. I have so much to say to you, so much to hear about your life. I want to know my daughter. Please don't go now."

The man was near tears as he begged her. *I feel like I'm taking his life away.* Did Gregory want her to stay as well? *He still won't look at me.* Gregory finally looked up, his eyes pleading with her.

"Please stay, Miss Spencer."

"She will do no such thing!" Alexander roared somewhere off to the side. Where had he come from? "Maddy, don't listen to these men. They rejected you, did they not? These people don't deserve you."

If Alexander had not interfered, things might have gone differently, but Madeline wanted to feel some satisfaction at denying the man what he wanted. Besides, she did want to get to know her father.

"I'm staying a little while longer, Alexander. I suggest you go to America without me."

Chapter 24

Madeline studied the board, knowing that a win was within her grasp. With deliberate slowness, she smiled as she made her final move.

“Checkmate,” she declared.

The Duke chuckled. “That’s the fourth time in a row. No one has been able to win against me, and yet you do it with ease. I imagine your father taught you?”

“Papa taught me what he knew, and then I surpassed him. It’s all about strategy, isn’t it? And I excel at that.”

"If you had been a man, you might have conquered the world ten times over."

Madeline smiled. “Alas! I’m just a woman with the ear of one of the most influential men in England.”

“That would be me?” the Duke asked.

“Who else? Since people found out who I am, they have done nothing but scrape and bow before me. It’s rather ridiculous considering how they treated me.”

Two weeks had passed since Madeline made the decision to stay in England. Word had spread fast and set London buzzing with news of the Duke's daughter coming back from the dead. *I was never dead in the first place, but I understand what they mean.* Madeline had been presumed dead for twenty-two years, and suddenly she showed up quite out of the blue.

Everyone wanted to know how such a thing could have happened, but Madeline and the Duke were withholding that information until they were ready to share it with the public. It was still a painful memory for the old man, and although Madeline had returned to him, he still had to deal with the truth of his wife's life in America. What lovestruck man wished to know that his wife had married another man and fathered three more children?

"We all owe you a huge apology for doubting who you were when it was obvious," the Duke said. "Anyone who knew Hyacinth would have known you are her daughter."

"Sometimes, we deny what is right in front of us to protect us from pain. When should we release information about my return from the dead?"

"We do not owe people an explanation, but I suppose something must be said soon," the man answered. "The *Ton* tend to make up their own stories if not given enough information to keep them happy. We can take Gregory up on his offer and have him publish it in his daily news. It has a wide circulation, so most people will receive it."

Madeline coloured at the mention of Gregory. She couldn't help it. The Viscount had been coming to the Duke's house every day for the last two weeks and acting kindly towards her. At first, it was awkward and tense because of all that had happened, but they were able to clear the

air after Gregory finally let down his shield and apologised to her. He explained everything to her with heavy remorse and asked for her forgiveness. Madeline had readily forgiven him because she knew he had done it out of love for the Duke.

Remaining angry with him would not have done her any good. It probably would have done more harm because Gregory was an important part of the Duke's life, and Madeline didn't want to be a stumbling block between them. *I have to leave England eventually and return home, and he needs someone to be with him.*

Aunt Dianne had not been impressed when she learnt she would have to stay in England for a little while longer, but she eventually warmed to the idea and enjoyed being the centre of attention. Everyone wanted to know about Lady Russell's aunt and sent invitation after invitation for teas and dinner parties. It was all rather odd considering they were the same people two weeks ago, but with Madeline's new elevated status, they might as well be new people.

"We'll speak to him about it when he arrives," said Madeline. "He'll be a tad later today because there were some problems with the seamstress and Marcia's wedding dress. Apparently, the lace she ordered did not come and sent the woman into a panic. Marcia threatened to call off the entire wedding if her dress is not precisely how they had envisioned it."

"Oh, dear," the Duke replied. "Gregory has his hands full. I do not recall Henrietta's wedding being this grand, but then again, Marcia has always been Lydia's favourite. Will you be going to the wedding? I will only go if you will."

"Oh, no, you will not put the weight of that on my shoulders. You received an invitation long before I did, and you have known them longer."

The Viscountess had personally delivered Marcia's wedding invitation last week, surprising Madeline. *I suppose being an aristocrat makes all the difference.* Madeline now outranked the Viscountess, as well as Gregory. Everyone was trying to get into her good graces, which Madeline found amusing because she had done that very same thing when she first landed in England. *Everyone saw me as a charming novelty, but now I'm a respected member of the Ton.* It was amazing how things had changed.

“You do not truly wish to send me to such a pompous affair without the presence of my beautiful daughter to keep me company?” the Duke asked.

“You have Gregory,” Madeline insisted.

“Who will be attending to guests. He can hardly entertain me for the entire morning and afternoon.”

Madeline had planned not to go, but she wondered what Gregory might think about that. Did he want her there?

“I still have another month to decide. I'll give you my answer then.”

The Duke smiled. “Fair enough.”

Madeline set up the chessboard and put it aside. She had to be careful as the entire thing was made of the finest porcelain and ivory.

"Sometimes, your mother would do this after one of my matches against my business associates. She seemed to find it soothing to organise everything in its place."

The Duke often spoke about his late wife with a fondness only a man still in love would have. Madeline learnt something new about her mother each day, and she, in turn, told her father about her mother's life in America. It was bittersweet for the old man. He wanted to hear about his wife's life, but it was a life spent with another man. Madeline took care not to mention her father too much, but it was difficult at times. *Papa and Mama had been two peas in a pod and seldom did anything alone. They were always with each other.*

"Mama did like order, although her mind was chaotic. I always wondered how the two worked together, but she managed it."

"I wish I had known her better, but there was such a large age gap between us. I regret taking her youth, but I do not regret marrying her. I loved her, and I always will."

Madeline reached out to touch the man's hand. "I wish Mama had known what a wonderful man you were. Things might have been different."

"I cannot begrudge her happiness," the Duke said, patting her hand. "It brings me joy to know she lived her life to the fullest. Your father was able to give her what I could not, and for that, I am indebted to him. It would have been easy to hate him, but I cannot blame him for loving my Hyacinth. She captured the love of all those who drew close to her, as do you."

And the jealousy. Madeline had found out from the older servants about the dozens of women who had all hoped to marry the Duke after his first wife died, only to be usurped by a seventeen-year-old. That would have been a blow to anyone's ego.

"Mama was a social butterfly who knew how to bring out the best in people."

"Which she couldn't do while married to me," the old man said sadly. "I remember the very first time I ever saw her. It was at a party given in the countryside. Hyacinth had been so full of life and youthful vitality, and I thought I could have that for myself. I fell in love with her before I had even spoken to her and have been in love ever since. It did not matter to me that she was no longer with me- her memories were enough. At times I wish I can turn back the hands of time and do things a little differently, but that never gets me anywhere."

It amazed Madeline to know the Duke was as much in love with her mother as the day he met her. The man willingly put himself through the torture of holding onto the memories of a wife who never loved him. *I actually feel sorry for his first wife. She should have had a firmer place in his heart.* However, Madeline appreciated the Duke telling her about his life and filling in the gaps of her mother's life.

Sometimes the memories were sad, and other times they were amusing or sweet. *I never knew so much could happen within the first three years of a child's life, but I truly lived a charmed life, according to the Duke.* It was evident that Madeline had been spoilt and accustomed to getting her own way. Even Claverset Manor's servants had told Madeline stories of all the mischief she used to get up to. Once, she had given her nannies the slip and went missing for three hours. The entire house had been turned upside down, and dozens of servants were sent to search for her in the surrounding woods. Finally, she had been found curled up under the Duke's desk with her favourite

blanket. Everyone had apparently aged ten years that day and more servants were stationed to watch over her from then on.

"Well, we have twenty-two years to make up for and a name to call you. Papa is already taken, and Father seems too formal for me."

The Duke's eyes lit up. "What would you like to call me?"

Madeline had first brought up the subject three days ago. It seemed odd to call the Duke 'Your Grace' when he was her father. However, she needed a name to differentiate between the two fathers in her life. *How many women have the advantage of having two wonderful fathers in their lives?*

"How do people say father in other languages?"

"The ones I picked up from my travels were 'Baba' or 'Abba.' Quite a few cultures use those names."

Madeline tested the words. "Baba. Abba. I quite like Baba. Do you think anyone will think it strange that I call you that?"

"It doesn't matter. I want my daughter to call me whatever she feels most comfortable with," the man said, his eyes tearing.

"Then Baba it is. Shall I see about tea? I'm sure Gregory is on his way and would like some tea to soothe his frazzled nerves."

"A lesser man would have thrown in the towel and demand his sister and mother take care of things from now on!" the Duke commented. "I'm glad you've put your differences aside and decided to be friends."

Madeline wouldn't precisely call what she and Gregory had a 'friendship.' More than anything, they danced around each other, although they did manage to have a meaningful conversation whenever they happened to be alone. Well, not completely alone because Aunt Dianne was always hovering not too far away. She took her chaperoning duties seriously. Madeline knew there was something between her and Gregory, but neither of them wished to admit it first. *Many a time, I have wished to order him to speak what is on his heart, but that would be hypocritical since I am not able to do the same thing.* At least she knew Julia was no longer in the picture.

Soon after everyone found out that Madeline was the Duke's daughter, the truth about what Julia had done had come to light. The woman had purposefully planted seeds of doubt in the guests' minds at the ball, explaining their sudden behaviour change. Also, the step on Madeline's foot had been deliberate. The woman was currently closeted somewhere in the countryside until the scandal died down, but Madeline doubted she would see Julia for months to come, perhaps even years.

"You are our common denominator, Baba," she said, surprised at how easily the name fell from her lips. "There is no reason to be angry with each other. Gregory only sought to protect you, and I understand that. Besides, you respect him greatly, and that's a high enough commendation for me. Now, let me leave you for a moment while I arrange a tea tray."

Madeline gave the Duke a peck on his cheek, also finding this gesture as natural as if she had been doing it for decades.

“I think we have enough time for one more game of chess, my child,” the man said. “And this time, I shall win.”

Madeline chuckled. “Strong words for a man who has lost every match today. I’ll take white this time.”

The Duke grinned happily. “Black has always been my colour. I’m certain to win.”

Madeline loved seeing the man happy. The Duke seemed healthier and full of life since she agreed to stay in England a little longer. She had to admit she was happy as well, but she still missed her home and family. *At some point, I’ll have to leave.* Madeline would cross that bridge once they got to it.

Gregory was acting odd. Madeline observed him, noting the tension in his body. *What on earth has gotten into him?* He had not been himself since his arrival half an hour ago. *Not even Cook’s pastries are enough to entice him to eat.* Gregory still had the cup she had served him when he sat down for tea while she and Baba were on their third one.

“Are you unwell, Gregory?” she asked.

“Why do you ask that?” he said.

“You appear... high strung. Did the issue with the material and seamstress give you so much stress?”

Gregory shook his head. "No, it's not that."

"Then what is it, young man?" asked Aunt Dianne.

She had joined them soon after waking up from her nap. Everyone's attention turned to Gregory, who squirmed in his chair. Something certainly was wrong.

"I've never seen you so tense, Gregory," said the Duke.

"I'm fine!" the man insisted. "There is nothing wrong with me. Perhaps I am merely tired."

Madeline could understand that. "Yes. Exhaustion can do a lot of damage to a person. Perhaps you should lie down in one of the rooms once you've finished your tea."

"Actually, I would prefer a walk in the garden."

"That would work as well," Madeline agreed.

"Will you accompany me?" Gregory asked.

"Well, uh..." Madeline looked to her aunt, who nodded her head.

"Of course, dear. 'Tis not as though you do not know Gregory, and you are within your own home with a swarm of servants walking about."

Gregory seemed to pale at Aunt Dianne's words, swallowing hard.
What has gotten into him?

"Then I would be glad to accompany you, Gregory. Especially if it will help put you in a better frame of mind."

"Trust me, it will," Gregory said with certainty. "Shall we?"

Madeline took his arm, frowning when she noticed Baba and Aunt Dianne exchange looks. What was that all about? She didn't have time to think about it as Gregory picked up the pace, pulling her along.

"Do slow down, Gregory. There is no reason to rush."

He immediately slowed down. "My apologies. I suppose I'm just in a hurry to get there."

"Why?"

"You'll find out soon enough," he said cryptically.

Madeline didn't say anything else but was curious what Gregory was on about. Finally, they came to her mother's garden, which had now become Madeline's personal garden. She was tending it with the gardener's help but was careful to keep to the original pattern her mother had created.

Gregory sat her down but didn't take a seat himself. Instead, he paced back and forth in front of her.

"You'll give me a headache with all that walking," she complained.

"I'm sorry," he breathed out, running his fingers through his hair. "I just didn't think this would be so hard."

"What?"

"Asking to court you," he said more to himself.

Madeline went still. Had she heard right? *I believe I did.* Gregory wished to court her, but he was terribly shy about it. Madeline found that sweet. She had been waiting for him to say something like this for a long time.

"You could just ask me and allow me to answer you," she said, smiling.

"Ask you what?" he asked, confused.

Madeline looked heavenward. *He's even more disturbed than I thought.*
“You just said that you wish to court me.”

Colour rushed to Gregory's cheeks as he cupped the back of his neck.
“I said that out loud?”

“You did. Now, ask me properly.”

Gregory cleared his throat, linking his hands behind his back. “I, uh... Madeline, would you allow me to court you? I know that it seems rather sudden, but I have been thinking about it for quite some time, and you are the only woman I've felt such a connection with. But if you do not wish to, I fully understand,” he added quickly.

Madeline smiled. “I take it you spoke to Baba?”

“Baba?”

“The Duke,” she clarified. “That is what I have decided to call him. It means father.”

“Oh, I see. Yes, I did speak to him, and he gave me his blessing. I didn't think I'd get it after all the pain I caused you, but I couldn't simply stand by and let another day past, not at least trying. There's something between us, and I'd like to explore it further. Will you allow me to court you? Granted that everyone will know you are no longer eligible.”

That had been another new development since people finding out about her relationship with the Duke. Men had become far more interested in her, and their mothers wanted Madeline to visit their homes. *Perhaps this has made Gregory jealous.*

“I cannot think of anyone else I would rather have court me,” she said truthfully. “I, too, feel a pull towards you that I cannot understand. As you said, it's worth exploring.”

Gregory let out a whoosh of breath. “Thank goodness!”

“Were you worried I would say no?”

“You are within your rights to do so.”

“Then I suppose you're fortunate that I like you.”

Gregory grinned. “I cannot think why, but I'm grateful. Now that I've gotten that out of the way, I could eat a horse.”

Madeline laughed. “Come along. We might as well tell the others and turn our tea into a celebratory dinner.”

The courtship meant an extension of her stay in England, and she was going to have a lot of explaining to do in her next letter to her family. *It'll be worth it.* She just knew it.

Epilogue

Gregory was a ball of nerves as he took his seat opposite the Duke. An entire year had passed since he had started courting Madeline, and now it was time to take it to the next step. *Although eight months of that year were spent apart.* That had been the most difficult time for him. Gregory would have left England and followed Madeline to America, but his responsibilities had been too great to leave.

Sometimes, he had driven himself mad with the thought of men clamouring around her and worried himself sick that Madeline would one day wake up and realise he's not what she wants. *I had to rely on our strong bond to keep me going and the letters we sent to each other.*

Gregory hadn't wanted Madeline to go, but she had insisted she needed to keep her word to her family about spending Christmas with them. *I think I admire her even more for keeping to her word.* He had also made her promise to never remove the ring he had given her as a promise of what to come. Gregory had not proposed, but he had wanted Madeline to look at the ring every day and know that she belonged to him. He didn't want any other man on her mind. *Certainly not that Alexander fellow.* Fortunately, the man had eventually gotten married to one of her friends and was finally out of Madeline's hair.

“What is it you wanted to see me about, Gregory?” the Duke asked.

Gregory's thoughts were once again centred on the reason why he was sitting before the older man.

“I would like to marry your daughter, Your Grace.”

The Duke's face remained expressionless. "Is that so?"

"Yes, Your Grace. I love her and don't want to wait anymore."

Madeline arrived in England a few days ago with her entire family and stayed with the Duke. The house had probably never seen as much activity in the last week as in all the years it has been occupied. It was certainly a merrier place to be in.

Seeing Madeline after eight months had felt like drinking water after a week's fast. Gregory had met them at the docks and helped them transport their belongings to the Duke's estate. Madeline had been even more beautiful than he recalled, taking his breath away. It hadn't taken even a minute of talking before he had known there and then that he couldn't live without her for so many months again.

"Are you certain?" the Duke asked. "I do not want you to marry my daughter and make her unhappy. She deserves only the best."

"And I'll give her the best, Your Grace. You know that my word is my honour. I will cherish your daughter like no other man will be able to do and give her all the happiness I am capable of giving. I just want her in my life because I don't want to live without her. I've been without her for eight months, and that has been difficult to handle. However, it has taught me just how much I love Madeline. There is no other woman for me."

The Duke's face broke into a broad smile. "Those are precisely the words I wished to hear. Of course, I give my consent to ask for my daughter's hand in marriage, although you'll have to ask her other

father as well. He has more right to her than I do.”

The Duke was right. “I hadn't thought of that, but you're quite correct. I cannot afford to offend one of the most important men in her life.”

“I suggest you speak to him now while the women are off on their shopping trip.”

Gregory's mother, Aunt Dianne, his sisters, and Madeline had all decided to go to Oxford street to make it a day of shopping. Now that his mother understood that Madeline was not a threat, she had welcomed the younger woman with open arms. *I daresay she has even grown to love Madeline.*

Gregory left the Duke soon after and approached Mr Spencer. The man had been rather cool with him at first but had warmed up to Gregory when he witnessed how happy Madeline was around him. *I hope that counts in my favour.*

Gregory found the man in the drawing-room with his sons. *This might be a little more difficult than I realised. Timothy, Lawrence, and Bailey have not been the easiest people to win over.* They all had not liked the idea of a man keeping their sister away from them, and certainly not someone who will make their sister settle down across an entire ocean.

“Mr Spencer, may I have a word with you?”

Please send your sons out of the room. I need complete privacy if I'm going to say everything I need to.

“Of course, Lord Blithely. Boys, give us a moment, please.”

Mr Spencer's sons reluctantly left the room, casting dark looks in Gregory's direction. *They will not be happy about me marrying their sister, but I'm sure they'll come around.* He hoped. Once the boys had left, Mr Spencer spoke.

“This is about asking for my daughter's hand in marriage, isn't it?”

Gregory was surprised. “Y-yes, sir. I've come to ask for your permission.”

“I must admit I was curious about the man my daughter couldn't stop talking about. I wanted to see if you were as wonderful in person as she described you to be. I must say that you didn't disappoint me. Maddy is clearly happy with you, and all I want is my daughter's happiness, so you have my blessing.”

Gregory wanted to yell and shout to the heavens, but he controlled himself. “Thank you, Mr Spencer.”

“How do you intend to propose to her?” the older man asked.

“I will speak to the Mrs Loveleen and Cook to turn tonight's dinner into a joyous occasion. Once the dessert has been cleared, we'll move on to the drawing-room as usual; that is when I shall propose.

“You have really thought this through, haven't you?”

More than the man would ever know. “Yes, sir. I need everything to go perfectly because that's what Madeline deserves.”

The only thing he had no control over was her answer.

Madeline didn't understand why they were having a dinner party today, but she didn't ask any questions. Lately, her mind had been occupied with thoughts about the direction her relationship with Gregory was taking. *I have already made up my mind that there is no other man for me but Gregory, but I do not know if he feels the same.*

“Why don't I arrange your hair?” asked Rebecca, a brush in hand. “It is a celebratory dinner, after all.”

“I wish I knew what we were celebrating. No one seems to know.”

“Perhaps 'tis your return to England.”

Madeline shook her head. “Baba is throwing a ball for that. Besides, we had a celebratory dinner on the very first night.”

Rebecca shrugged. “I am without answers. Let me do your hair, we shall find out soon enough about what's going through the Duke's mind.”

"I suppose so. Don't do anything too fancy that will require time to undo when it's bedtime."

"A simple braid atop your head threaded with a string of pearls should be easy enough to take out," Rebecca replied. "So, tell me, do you think Lord Blithely is ready to take the next step?"

That's the very question Madeline had been asking herself. She understood that they had spent eight months apart, but those months had proven just how much she loved him. Did Gregory feel the same way, or was he drifting away? *He hasn't been acting his usual self lately.*

"I do not know. I know he cares for me, but he has not used the word love yet."

"It's clear the man loves you, even if he has not yet confessed it," Rebecca assured. "He hardly takes his eyes off you whenever you're together."

It was the same for Madeline. "Time can only tell what will happen to us."

Rebecca helped Madeline with the rest of her attire, and before she knew it, it was time for dinner. The Duke escorted her to the dining room, seating her on his left while her father sat on his right. Madeline was disappointed when Gregory did not sit next to her but opposite her.

She wished to speak with him but couldn't do so without talking over their other guests. *I haven't seen much of him today, and now when we have the opportunity to speak, he sits far away from me. Why?* Madeline also noticed how nervous Gregory seemed. The last time she had seen him this tense was the day he had asked to court her. Could he be planning to call their courtship off? That would be devastating.

The guests moved on to the drawing-room soon after dessert was served, but all Madeline wished to do was go to bed. She couldn't understand what was going on with Gregory, and it was stressing her.

"May I have your attention, please?" said Baba.

Madeline looked up to see the Duke and her father standing next to each other, their faces alight with smiles. *I'm glad they managed to get along well.* The guests stopped their chatter, turning to them.

"My good friend and I wish to welcome you once again to this dinner party. We know it was last minute, but we're glad you could make it. It has been a wonderful evening thus far, but we promise it will only get better."

Madeline's father nodded. "The Duke is right. Gregory, would you come here, please?"

She watched with interest as the Viscount made his way to the two men. Gregory took his place between them, his eyes immediately searching her out. *What are these men up to?*

"Good evening," Gregory greeted. "I'm glad you all could be part of

this important moment for me.”

A wave of murmurs travelled through the room as the guests tried to guess what Gregory was talking about. Madeline was just as clueless. *Perhaps I should have declined the invitation to go shopping with the Viscountess and spent the day with Gregory instead. Then I might have known what he is about to do.*

Madeline watched Gregory take a deep breath before taking something out of his pocket as he came towards her. She searched his face, bewildered by what was happening. Once he was standing before her, he knelt on one knee. Madeline's hands automatically went to her mouth before her mind even registered what was going on.

"Madeline Spencer, I've waited a long time to do this and probably wasted a lot of time. I do not want to repeat the same mistake. I want to declare before everyone in this room that I love you and wish to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?"

Is that what he had planned to do? *I had no idea!* Madeline slowly lowered her hands, looking around the room at her family. Her two fathers seemed genuinely happy; even her brothers were smiling, but what about Gregory's family? Her eyes found the Viscountess, her daughters and their husbands. They all seemed to be smiling, and Lady Blithely looked close to tears. *I hope those are happy tears.*

“When a man bares his heart to the woman he loves,” Gregory whispered. “He does expect an answer.”

Madeline chuckled. “I do apologise. You caught me off-guard. I thought you were going to end our courtship.”

Gregory pulled his head back. "How can you think that? I love you, Maddy. There's no other woman for me but you."

"You were acting strangely," she explained. "I didn't know what to make of it."

"Goodness, Maddy! Just say, yes!" Bailey yelled from across the room.

Everyone laughed. Gregory smiled and took her hand. "You heard what your brother said."

"He is rather wise for an eight-year-old, isn't he?" she said, chuckling. Madeline grew serious, gazing down at the man she loved. "Gregory Montgomery, nothing would make me happier than accepting your proposal."

Four months later, they stood in front of each other, reciting the vows the vicar was giving them. The wedding was a small affair in her mother's garden, with just the immediate family attending.

Gregory slipped the ring onto her finger, kissing her hand before letting go. "You are never to take that off."

"I haven't taken the other two off, have I?"

The vicar cleared his throat, drawing their attention to him. It took what felt like another hour before the man declared them husband and wife. No kissing was allowed, but Gregory had promised before the wedding to make up for it. The memory of that had her blushing.

“I hope all that lovely colour on your cheeks is because of me,” said Gregory.

“Who else?”

“Good. Should we slip away for a while? I promised my wife that I would kiss her once the ceremony was over.”

Madeline's eyes widened. “We cannot leave the guests! What will they think?”

“That a wife is with her husband. What else?”

Gregory didn't give her more time to think about it as he pulled her away from the crowd and fulfilled his promise. Madeline didn't think her blush would ever leave her cheeks.

THE END

*Can't get enough of Madeline and Gregory? Then make sure to check out
the [Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...*

How will Madeline continue her quest for social justice? Will she ever be successful?

Will Madeline live with her beloved fathers or is one of them going to miss the raising of her offspring?

Will our dearest couple endure any future dislocations? What unexpected surprises will fate hold for their family life?

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://arianorton.com/madeline>

(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from “A Lord's Whimsical Governess”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)

The book cover features a woman with reddish-brown hair styled in an updo, wearing a vibrant blue, off-the-shoulder, short-sleeved dress with a full skirt. She is standing in a lush garden, framed by a rustic stone archway heavily laden with climbing pink roses. The background shows more greenery and a glimpse of a stone wall. The author's name, 'ARIA NORTON', is written in a white, elegant, serif font at the top. The title, 'A LORD'S WHIMSICAL GOVERNESS', is written in a large, white, ornate serif font across the lower half of the image, partially overlapping the woman's dress.

ARIA NORTON

A LORD'S
WHIMSICAL
GOVERNESS

A Lord's Whimsical Governess

Introduction

Elisabeth Steele is in desperate need of a paying position to help her family after her father's untimely death. When she sees an advertisement for a governess position at Hensol Manor, it feels like a miracle. While her fun and imaginative way of teaching quickly wins over her two young pupils, her employer is definitely not as easy to crack. The lord of the manor may be handsome, but he has firm ideas about his younger brothers' education. Forced to walk a fine line between practicing her unusual but effective methods and doing as she's instructed, she can't help but be affected by the Earl's mesmerising gaze. When an intense attraction to this stubborn man is added to the equation, will her growing feelings affect Elisabeth's decision to defy him?

Charles Talbot, Earl of Hensol, is reeling after the sudden death of his mother, which leaves him in charge of his two younger brothers. In the following months, as they chase off successive governesses with their mean tricks, he finds himself at his wit's end. Out of sheer desperation, he hires a local girl with no references, hoping for the best. With her unconventional teaching methods, it becomes clear that the beautiful young woman is not at all what he expected in a governess and he's entranced. Already courting a woman approved by his mother before her passing, how will he handle the startling realisation he's rapidly falling in love with the red-haired beauty that

is Elisabeth?

As Elisabeth and Charles clash over the boys' lessons, their feelings deepen and become harder to ignore. Torn between the wishes of a man she's losing her heart to and her wish to help his two grief stricken brothers, Elisabeth's position becomes increasingly precarious. Will her continued defiance lead to her being turned out of the house in disgrace or will Charles bend, seeing his brothers' happiness and discovering his own too? Will their inevitable conflict tear them apart forever or will their hearts find the path to each other by following the calling of true love?

Chapter 1

Charles Talbot, Earl of Hensol, waited outside the door of his mother's bedchamber. His two young brothers, William and Matthew, sat by his side. Matthew kicked his feet back and forth, dangling inches above the floor while William sat in stony silence. A pang of grief shot through Charles' heart.

Their mother was dying. William and Matthew, seven and five years old, would have precious few memories of her, just as they had none of their father. He had died only four years earlier, shortly after Matthew had been born.

Since then, Charles had taken on the weighty responsibility of running the estate and making sure his brothers were cared for. When his mother had fallen ill at the beginning of the year, Charles felt the burden pressing down on him even more. What was he going to do without his mother? She had been his rock while he had learned to run the estate. Now, he would be alone, the man of the house, and a substitute parent to his brothers.

"My Lord?" The doctor eased his head out the door. "You and your brothers may come in now."

Charles ushered William and Matthew into the room but kept the doctor for a moment. "How is she?"

The doctor shook his head. "I'm afraid t'will not be long. Her lungs are filling with fluid. There is nothing more to be done."

Charles nodded, his heart breaking. "Thank you for trying to make her comfortable."

"Of course. I'll wait just over here." The doctor trudged to the hearth on the room's far side, sitting down in a chair to rest. Charles had been with his mother all night and into this morning and knew how exhausted the doctor must be as well.

Charles rang for the housekeeper, and she soon appeared. "Please bring the doctor some tea."

"Yes, My Lord."

Charles then turned to the bedside. His brothers waited a few feet away, afraid to go any closer. Their mother's condition had worsened over the last few weeks. William had become increasingly difficult to deal with as he tried to navigate his grief. Nightmares had plagued Matthew, his mind fighting against the thought of losing his mother.

She held her hand out to her boys, trying to smile. She had grown so thin, her cheeks sunken, her skin deathly white. "Come here, my angels," she said to William and Matthew. They approached the bedside tentatively. Matthew reached out and took her hand. William merely stood there, looking down at the shell of a woman who had always been a constant in his life. Now that was about to be gone.

"Hello, Mother," Matthew said. "I caught a butterfly today." That made her smile. "Did you? That is wonderful, Matty. What colour is it?"

"White with black dots. Can I keep it, Mother?"

She squeezed his hand and brought it to her lips, kissing it gently. "Of course, you can." She glanced up at Charles, pain filling her eyes. He knew it was not so much the pain of approaching death but the thought of leaving them, especially her two youngest sons. "You must keep it and think of me every time you look at it."

William sniffed as he listened to the conversation. She turned her attention to him. He took it dutifully, even though Charles could see he was uncomfortable. Charles knew precisely how he was feeling. Perhaps if he didn't allow her to speak her goodbyes, he could stave off death. The wish of a seven-year-old to keep his mother for a little while longer. If only wishes could work miracles.

Charles knelt between the boys, wrapping his arms around their shoulders. "They've been very good, Mother. You should be proud." Tears welled in his eyes, mirroring their mother's.

"Very good. You must all promise to be good ... when I am gone."

William jerked his hand free of her slight grasp. "No! You cannot leave us! I'll never be good again if you do!"

Charles took a moment to recover from the shock. Instead of allowing him to reprimand William, Mother held up her hand. "Will, look at me. Look at me, son, please." When William finally met her gaze, she touched his cheek. "I don't want to leave you, son. If it were in my power, you know I would stay. Your brother will take good care of you, so know." She brushed her fingers through his short brown hair, seeming to take in every memory of his face so she could take it with

her. "I love you, son."

William started to cry then, and Matthew followed, even though unable to understand death's finality. They buried their faces in her arm and wept. Charles stood and gave them their moment, blinking back tears of his own. He had to be strong for them.

"No more tears, now, my angels. Let me speak with Charles for a moment." She drew a ragged breath as the boys stood aside by the housekeeper. Charles sat in a chair next to the bed and took her hand. It felt like ice.

"I need you to be strong for them. Take care of them and be sure they grow up to be men your father and I would be proud of."

"I will, Mother. I promise."

"I know I can count on you. There is one last thing I charge you with." She paused as a fit of coughing seized her. When she was able to speak again, her voice was raspy. "You must find a wife and carry on the family line. Hensol must last to the next generation. Your father worked so hard to keep this estate intact."

Charles let out a breath. Finding a wife was the last thing on his mind right now. However, to ease her departure from this life, he would promise. "I will find a wife, Mother. She will not be able to live up to you when it comes to being mistress of this great estate, but I will try to find someone worthy."

She coughed, rising and shifting over on her side. He placed a hand on

her back, looking around at the doctor. The man simply shook his head, indicating that this was normal. There was nothing he could do to help her. It took her several seconds to recover.

Lying back down on the pillows, she closed her eyes and tried to catch her breath. When she spoke again, her voice was gravelly, no louder than a whisper. "Nonsense. There are several ladies who would do the job credibly – Lady Amelia, for example."

Charles smiled and shook his head with embarrassment. "She would never consider me. I am much too subdued for her type."

His mother grabbed his hand and squeezed, capturing his gaze in earnest. He did not expect a dying woman to be able to squeeze his hand so hard. "Do not wait too long after I am gone. No one can know what this life will bring. It is your duty to keep this estate going, son. It is your duty ..." Her voice carried all the regret of having to leave them. Charles could tell that she was fading fast.

"I promise, Mother. I will do my duty; I swear to you." He waved the boys over, knowing that time was short. William was stoic, standing by the bed while trying to maintain a brave front. Matthew, however, threw his arms over their mother's side and wept.

"Do not leave us, Mama. Please, stay with us."

Charles felt his own tears welling at the corners of his eyes. He knew exactly how Matthew felt. He had cried at his father's bedside, even though he was a full-grown man. They had been very close, and he supposed that a part of grief was also selfishness. He had not felt ready to take over the running of the estate.

"I believe in you, son. You will do well," his father had said right before he passed.

Charles placed a hand on Matthew's back and pulled him into a hug. The boy clung to him as if he were drowning.

"I love you, my boys. All of you. Try to remember me as I was ..."

The doctor came over then and whispered to Charles. "You may want to send the boys away, especially Matthew. The last bit of this can be rough."

"Of course." Charles nodded to the housekeeper, asking her to take the boys to their governess.

The doctor made to leave, but Charles stopped him. "Please, stay. I don't know if I can do this alone."

The older man nodded, smiling sadly. "Of course, My Lord."

Charles sat down and watched the life drain from her face. Her breathing was very loud and crackled. The fluid in her lungs was slowly drowning her. He could not bear to watch but watch he must. No one should be alone as they passed from this life.

He struggled to stay awake, having slept little during the last few

days. He leaned his head against the back of the chair and tried to think of happier times. Before he knew it, he was nodding off.

Awakening with a start a few minutes later, he saw the doctor was standing over his mother, searching for a pulse. "Doctor?"

He turned and shook his head. "It's over. She's gone, My Lord." He took the edge of the sheet and started to cover her face. Standing to join him at the head of her bed, Charles stayed his hand.

"I'll do it," Charles offered. The doctor walked away, turning his back so that he could have some privacy. Charles leaned down and kissed his mother's forehead tenderly. "Goodbye, Mother." He lifted the sheet and covered her face. Taking a few steps away from the death bed, he joined the doctor. "Thank you again for all you've done."

"My deepest condolences, My Lord."

"Thank you." Charles shook his hand and left the room, walking down the hall in a daze. He went to his brother's room to tell them she was gone. Gone. How could she be gone? The reality of it had not quite set in. Perhaps it would take days or even weeks for the realization to sink in.

He opened the door and saw the governess was at the blackboard. She was making them run through their sums, no doubt, to keep their minds occupied. When she spotted him at the door, she halted mid-sentence and excused herself from the room. The boys turned, running to him.

Hugging them, he lowered his voice. "Mama is gone to be with the

angels, boys. It's over now." Matthew dissolved into tears again, but William took a step back and put a hand on Charles' shoulder.

"I shall help you run the estate if you would like. I know there is a lot of work to do."

Charles smiled.

"That is very kind of you, thank you. I shall let you know if I need your assistance, Will. I think I shall need more help with looking after Matty. Can you do that for me?"

Will straightened, puffing out his chest. "I'll look after him."

"Good man." Charles took him by the shoulders, and they all sat down on the wood floor. "We must all be brave and look out for each other now. We are all we have left."

"Shall we make a pact?" William suggested.

"Yes, a marvellous idea. We shall make a pact to always be there for each other, shall we? Here, give me your hands. Good. We've shaken on it, and our pact cannot be broken."

The boys leaned their heads on his shoulders. Charles took a deep breath as they sat in silence. He was their guardian now. He only hoped he would do a good job caring for his brothers.

Chapter 1

Six months later

Charles was working in his study when he heard the knock on the door. He looked up and called for whoever it was to enter before returning his attention to a request from one of his tenants.

When he looked up, his housekeeper was standing before his desk. He put the letter down and motioned for her to take a seat. "What can I do for you, Mrs Taylor?"

She folded her hands dutifully in her lap and took a deep breath before beginning. He could tell this was not going to be a pleasant conversation for her. "My Lord, I appreciate the grief that you and your brothers are experiencing. However, I cannot continue to fulfill the role of housekeeper and governess. Master William and Master Matthew require constant supervision to make sure they stay out of mischief. Their studies are suffering, and my duties as housekeeper are as well."

"I understand. Of course, you know that I have been searching for a new governess for the boys. I hope to have one within the new few weeks." Charles stood and began to pace. Ever since their mother had died, the boys had become increasingly difficult. The governess his mother had employed left shortly after her passing. His brothers tormented her instead of focusing on their studies. She went to find an easier position, where her talents for discipline and education would be appreciated, the former governess had told him.

Charles had begged her stay and had reprimanded the boys. But

nothing he said seemed to make a difference. He was so busy with the estate affairs that he had little time to spend with them. He knew they resented his long trips away. Their behaviour was even worse when he was away.

The last governess had left without notice as soon as he had returned home from the previous trip. That was three weeks ago, and he knew that he was in danger of losing his housekeeper as well if he did not find a governess soon.

"I cannot wait weeks, sir. I do not wish to sound callous or rude, but I did not come here to be the governess. I came to be your housekeeper and make sure that your home is properly managed."

Charles halted, looking down at the woman's worn features. He imagined she would have been a beautiful woman when she was young. He knew that his brothers were running her ragged. It was not fair for him to ask her to take on double the duties without compensation. He would give her a bonus as soon as a new governess was found. "Would you be willing to help me interview new candidates, Mrs Taylor? Perhaps if we help each other, we may find someone quickly?"

Her face brightened at this. "Of course, My Lord. I will send out another advertisement right away!" She stood and curtsied.

"Thank you, Mrs Taylor." When she was gone, he rubbed his hand over the back of his neck, letting out a long sigh. The burden of his responsibilities weighed him down. Finding another governess should have been the least of his worries. However, if he wanted to keep Mrs Taylor, he would have to.

"How can I be expected to run this estate and worry over my brothers every second of the day!" he growled. He would speak with the boys, threaten them if he had to. They had become unruly over the last few

months. His mother would be ashamed of him if she could see. Charles let out another frustrated sigh. He was failing them.

Charles left the study, knowing that he could not focus until he had reprimanded his brothers. Mrs Taylor did not deserve how they were treating her. He stormed up the stairs to the classroom and opened the door.

The scene that confronted him made his blood boil. Instead of sitting down to their studies, his brothers were playing cricket. William threw the ball, and Matty hit it. The ball went sailing across the room and through the window. It shattered, raining glass down on them. They covered their heads and knelt, trying to shield themselves.

"Boys!" Charles yelled, coming into the room. They turned in tandem, their eyes wide with fear. They stood, and William put an arm around Matthew's shoulders. He started to whimper, tears streaming down his face.

Charles felt terrible for scaring Matthew, but he had had enough. This was the last straw. "Come here this instant," he bellowed. "Sit down."

The boys did as they were told, sitting in the desks where they should have been working all along.

Charles towered over them, giving them a stern gaze. "Now, look here. I have just had a talk with Mrs Taylor, and she has informed me that you are not doing your work. And now I come up here to find you playing cricket in the house! Do you know how much windows cost?"

Matthew sniffed, and Charles pulled out a handkerchief for him. He thrust it into his face and scowled, "Wipe your nose and stop snivelling." Kneeling, he softened. "I know that it has been difficult without Mama. However, that is no excuse to torment your governesses and drive me batty. I need to focus on my work with the estate, boys. William, you told me that you wanted to help with the estate. Well, you can help me by being diligent in your studies and making sure Matty does the same."

William rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. "It's just a bloody window. And our governesses teach us nothing of value. They are old and boring."

"Use that language again and I shall take a switch to you. Do you understand?" William backed down and nodded. "Would you rather I send you away to school early? I had hoped to wait until you were a bit older, but if you do not change your behaviour and your attitude, I will have no other choice."

William straightened, and his eyes turned pleading. "No, please, brother, don't send me away yet. Matty couldn't bear it."

He took their hands. "Then I need you to remember our pact. We promised to be there for each other. But you two have not been holding up your end of the bargain. I need you to behave and listen to your governess. When I do find another governess, you will not torment her. You will not play harmful pranks on her and drive her away. Do you understand?"

They both nodded, promising to be good. Charles gave them a stern look to make sure they knew that he was serious. "We promise to be good, Charles. Please don't send us away."

Charles stood. "As long as you keep your end of the bargain, I will not send you away early. Now, come downstairs and have your luncheon so that I can have this room cleaned."

The boys bounded out of the room, and Charles went over to the window. It would take weeks to have this fixed. Yes, another cost and worry added to his burdens. He called for one of the maids to come and clean up the glass. Returning to his study, he continued his answer to his tenant he had been handling before Mrs Taylor interrupted him.

After finishing the letter, he found that he needed a bit of fresh air. Leaving the study, he walked out into the hall and called for his horse to be saddled. He could check on the progress of the new wall he was having built on the edge of the property. His mount was brought to the front of the house, and he quickly got up in the saddle.

Riding off towards the western section of the wall, he let his mind wander. The warm breeze blew his short black hair as he rode. He took a deep breath and felt his calm return. If only he could spend all his time out of doors instead of in that stuffy office.

When he reached the wall, the foreman gave him an update. "We will have this section done by the end of the week. Then we'll move on down towards the south-facing wall and begin the reconstruction of the collapsed areas."

"Very well done, Jarvis. It looks very sturdy," Charles praised.

"Rider coming, sir!" one of the workers announced. Charles looked up and followed where the man pointed. He shielded his eyes against the

sun, recognizing his old friend, Lord Benjamin Graham. He raised his hand in greeting and went to meet him at the wall.

"Hello, old chap!" Benjamin said as he approached. His horse whinnied as he reined him to a halt on the opposite side of the wall.

"Hello, Ben. What brings you here?" Charles led his steed over to the wall and remounted.

"I came to see you. We've not seen you since we came back from the wedding trip." Benjamin was beaming. He and his wife, Anna, had married just a few months ago.

"I am glad to see you, my friend. Come, ride over to the southern sections with me." Charles clicked his lips and spurred his horse into a trot. Benjamin rode back a few yards and jumped the low wall, joining Charles as he rode down the stone wall.

"How was Europe?" Charles asked, inspecting the stonework as they went.

"Intoxicating. I was made for married life." He smiled. "When are you going to take the plunge, old fellow?"

Charles rolled his eyes. "I'm not that old. I suppose I shall have to marry soon. I did promise Mother I would find a wife."

Benjamin quieted, knowing that Charles was struggling to adjust to this new way of life. It had only been six months since his mother had died. "Anna has a cousin from Manchester ..." he teased, trying to lighten the mood. However, it was challenging to lighten Charles'

spirit, no matter what was going on. He was a stoic sort of man, always very serious, thinking of his duty first and foremost.

Charles laughed, though, to Benjamin's surprise. "I already have a woman in mind, Ben. You know that. Mother had her heart set on me marrying Lady Amelia. I suppose she is as good a choice as any."

"Ever the romantic," Benjamin said sarcastically. It was his turn to roll his eyes.

Charles waved him off. Benjamin had always been a bit cavalier, refusing to comply with the demands placed on him. His wife had been a housemaid. His father had objected to the match, of course, but Benjamin refused to budge.

Anna had turned out to be a diamond in the rough, slipping into her role as if she had been born to it. She seemed to be born a princess, with all the extraordinary graces and charm that came with the station. If not by blood, Anna was a lady by attitude.

"I don't have time to be romantic. Mother was right. I need to find a wife who can help me with the estate. I need to make a good impression on people and show them that I am fit to run this estate."

"Not to mention you need an heir to pass it on to. You are doing well with the improvements. The wall is coming along nicely, and I've seen your plans to improve the tenant housing. It's all very ambitious."

"It's the least I can do. The tenants deserve warm places to sleep. Did you know my grandfather was the last one who put new roofs on the

tenant houses?" Charles clicked his tongue. "However, you are right. I wonder sometimes if I have taken on too many projects at once. And then there are the boys ..." He could feel his anger boiling again as he thought about the broken window. He had to remind himself they were just boys. Once, he had been the rowdy, adventuresome youth he now saw in his brothers.

Those days were over now. Charles squared his shoulders, and Benjamin slapped him on the back. "You're doing a fine job with the boys. Do not let anyone tell you differently, my friend, including yourself."

Chapter 2

Elisabeth Steele wiped her brow with the back of her arm and continued kneading the lump of bread dough. Her younger sister, Harriet, sat in the corner with the mending.

"Mother!" Elisabeth called, plopping the dough into a bowl. She covered it with a fresh towel and left it in the window to rise, warmed by the sunshine.

"Yes, Elisabeth. What is it?" Her mother came into the kitchen carrying the finished laundry from the line. "Here, take this basket. Have you finished with the bread?"

Elisabeth rinsed her hands and dried them before taking the wicker basket. She began folding the clothes and placing them on the chair beside her. "It's rising in the sill."

"Good girl. Now, if you could get a position as a housemaid or even a cook, then we would be set." Her mother reminded her at least twenty times a day of their dire circumstance. Life had been difficult since her father had died two years prior. Her mother worked harder than anyone she knew, taking in extra washing to make ends meet. However, it was still not enough.

"I am trying, Mother. Since I was able to finish school before Father died, I should be able to get a position, perhaps even as a governess." Elisabeth had done her best to help her mother with the washing, staying up late into the night most days to try and help her. Along with the washing, her mother had five children. Elisabeth was twenty-three, an old maid in her mother's opinion. *"Since you refuse to get*

married, the least you can do is get a job and help me with the bills."

It was not that Elisabeth had an aversion to the idea of marriage. She simply knew she did not want to marry just anyone, wanting more from life than what her mother had settled for. Harriet, now sixteen, was about to finish school. However, Elisabeth did not want her to have to work as a housemaid. She had encouraged her to finish her schooling first, as there would be more opportunities afforded her.

"Look at this!" The ladies turned to see Elisabeth's brothers crashing into the house. Tom was the third child born to her parents, and at twelve years old, he was taking his new role as 'man of the house' very seriously. He was waving a news sheet in the air as he came in and promptly thrust it into Elisabeth's hands.

"What is this?" She flipped it over, and Tom turned the pages for her.

"Here, in the advertisement section. 'A top-notch governess'. That is what you have been looking for? And it is just over in the next town at Hensol Manor."

"It's exactly what I've been looking for, Tom. Well done. Mother, may I finish the folding later? I will go and answer the advertisement right away."

"Of course, my dear. Of course. However, I will finish the folding, and Tom will take your letter down the manor when you've finished."

It did not take long for Elisabeth to receive an answer from Hensol Manor. A Mrs Taylor wrote to her saying that they would be eager to interview Elisabeth at her earliest convenience. Elisabeth put on a shawl and decided to walk down that afternoon. She did not want the position to go to someone else.

Her mother sent Tom to walk down with her, and he described the beautiful mansion to her as they went. She instructed him to wait for her at the gate and was struck by the great house's magnitude. It was an imposing stone structure, which she assumed had been a castle at one point. She could tell that new sections had been added in recent years. It was a beautiful house, although she could see some improvements to the roof were being made.

She knocked on the door and was greeted by a stern-looking butler. "Yes, what is it?" He looked her up and down as if she were a stray kitten.

"Hello, sir. My name is Elisabeth Steele. I was told to come for an interview by a Mrs Taylor." She handed him the letter to show that she spoke the truth, but he had no chance to examine it.

"It is alright, Mr Becket. Miss Steele is here on my invitation." A tall woman dressed in black came to the door and extended her hand. The butler huffed and handed the letter back to Elisabeth, mumbling for her to come in.

Mrs Taylor motioned her to follow, taking her down the hall and a flight of stairs to her office near the kitchens. "I am sorry for Mr Becket. He has been here for more years than either of us have been alive. Old age has made him grouchy. Please do sit down." She motioned to a chair before her small desk and then was seated herself.

She folded her hands in her lap and took a moment to glance at Elisabeth's dress.

"You come from the village, I presume? It did not take you long to get here."

"No, Ma'am. I live only over the next hill. I hope it is alright that I have come so soon."

"Of course. We are quite eager to find someone to fill this position. Tell me, Miss Steele. What is your story? You do not seem like a young lady that should need a governess position."

Elisabeth had been expecting this question. She took a deep breath before diving in. "It is a matter of necessity, Madam. My father was a barrister, but we fell on hard times. I was away at school when he fell ill. I had finished my schooling and had been helping as a teacher's assistant. Then my father lost his clients, and we had to move out to the country, to a small cottage that had belonged to my aunt, God rest her soul. My father died shortly after the move from town, and my mother and I have been struggling to make ends meet ever since."

"I am sorry to hear that. But you say you were a teaching assistant?"

"Yes, Mrs Taylor. The headmistress of the school was going to give me my own class, as well, if I had not had to leave to help my mother. She has been taking in extra washing to help make ends meet."

Mrs Taylor studied her, shaking her head. "I am sorry this has happened to you and your family. I need to be sure you will rise to the challenge, though. The Masters Talbot can be quite headstrong boys."

“Do not have any fears in that, Mrs Taylor. I have two brothers who are quite rowdy. As far as my qualifications, I can send a letter to the headmistress and ask for a reference if you like. I am sure she would vouch for my skills in teaching the little ones. How old are the young Masters Talbot, may I ask?”

“William is seven, and Matthew is five. I think it would be wise to send off for a referral from the headmistress, but I can handle that if you will give me the name of the school.”

Elisabeth told her and gave her the address, also. When she was finished jotting it down, Mrs Taylor stood and shook her hand. “It was very nice to meet you, Miss Steele. I see no reason not to hire you, on a trial basis, that is. Lord Hensol will want to conduct his own interview. Can you come back in the morning? I’m sure he will find your skills satisfactory.”

“Thank you, Mrs Taylor! Yes, I will be here bright and early tomorrow morning!”

Mrs Taylor smiled and showed her to the front door, waving as she walked briskly down the drive to meet Tom.

When Elisabeth and Tom returned, Elisabeth burst through the door. “Mother! I have been hired for the position!” she squealed as they came into the house, their cheeks rosy from the long walk and the excitement.

“Praise the Lord! It seems things are finally starting to turn around for us. When do you start?” Her mother shooed the younger children out of the house and made Elisabeth sit at the table.

"Tomorrow morning. The housekeeper, Mrs Taylor, interviewed me and said I was perfect for the job."

"That's wonderful."

"And I get every second Tuesday off, so I will be able to come home and visit you all." Elisabeth was beaming with pride. She had known that holding out for a teaching job would be best, even though she had heard the life of a governess was quite lonely. No matter. She would have her books and her imagination to keep her company. And her new pupils, of course.

"Do you think this situation will give us what we need?" her mother asked as she stirred the stew pot.

"Mrs Taylor said that Lord Hensol pays every quarter. It will be twenty pounds per anum. You may expect the first installment in July." Elisabeth stood and hung her shawl on the peg. "We're positively rich!"

Her mother shook her head. "Of course, it is a blessing. I only wish they paid by the week instead of having to wait a whole three months."

"We shall have to make do, Mother. At least it is a job, and brighter times are on the horizon." Elisabeth, ever the optimist, put the whole idea of money out of her head for the time being and sat down to check the sums she had set her younger siblings to do. "Really, Tom. Two times two does not equal twenty-two. How do you expect to get anywhere in life if you do not take your studies seriously? Do them all

again."

He gave her a mischievous wink and wiped the slate clean. "Yes, Teacher."

The next morning, her mother saw her off, tears brimming in the corners of her eyes. "Be a good girl, my pet. And do write to us from time to time to let us know how you're getting on."

"I will, Mother." Elisabeth hugged her goodbye and walked out of the house, early morning mist swirling at her feet. She waved at the little wooden gate and headed down the lane.

By the time she arrived at Hensol Manor, the sun had fully risen, lighting up the face of the elegant house. It was even more breathtaking in the warmth of the sun, the birds chirping as they hopped from branch to branch. She stopped for a moment and took in the scene. "Yes, I think I shall like living here."

She went up to the front door and knocked. The butler opened the door with a scowl. "Servants' entrance." He pointed round to the left side of the house and closed the door in her face.

"Well, it seems the butler is not a morning person," she said under her breath. She found the servants' entrance and went in without knocking. Finding the cook at the stove, she cleared her throat and gave a cheery "Good morning!"

The woman turned around and smiled at her. "You must be the governess. I'll let Mrs Taylor know you've arrived. Set your bag down

on the chair if you like. Maggie, pour Miss Steele a cup of tea."

Maggie came over with a steaming hot kettle and poured the water over a tray of leaves.

"Thank you." Elisabeth sat down and placed the carpetbag at her feet. The hem of her dress was damp with the early morning dew. She had taken a shortcut across a field, hoping she would have time to change before meeting her charges.

"Ahh, Miss Steele. Prompt, just as you said you would be. Come with me," Mrs Taylor said as she came into the room. Elisabeth took a quick sip of tea and followed her.

"Thank you for the tea," she whispered to Maggie as she followed Mrs Taylor into the hall.

"I'll take you in to meet Lord Hensol now, and then you can go up and get acquainted with the boys."

Elisabeth looked down at her dress. "I had hoped to change before I met Lord Hensol, ma'am. First impressions, you know."

"He expressly asked that you be shown in as soon as you got here." Mrs Taylor continued her upstairs climb, her brisk walk forcing Elisabeth to trot to keep up with her.

"Oh, well. I hope he doesn't mind my appearance. I walked across a

field and ..."

"Straighten up. Answer his questions as succinctly as you can. He does not like waste, least of all with words." Mrs Taylor looked down at her hem and frowned. "Oh, well. You'll have to do. Come along."

Mrs Taylor knocked and opened the door to the study, announcing that the new governess was here. Elisabeth did her best to swallow the lump in her throat, pushing down her nervousness. Lord Hensol stood as she came into the room. He nodded in greeting, and she dipped a slight curtsy.

Mrs Taylor stood at her side, motioning for her to drop the carpetbag. She did so and then looked back up at Lord Hensol's foreboding features. He was much younger than she had imagined, with a handsome face and piercing hazel eyes.

"Good morning, Miss Steele. Please do sit down." He motioned for her to take a seat before the imposing mahogany desk. She came forward and sat, smoothing her skirts. She folded her hands demurely in her lap and told herself that this was not an interview. She already had the position. All she needed to do was behave naturally.

"How long have you been teaching, Miss Steele?" He gazed at her with such severity that she felt she was back at the girl's school being reprimanded by the teacher.

"When I finished my education at boarding school, I was made an assistant. That is where I took my training as a teacher, My Lord."

"And why did you not stay at the school to teach?"

"My father died two years ago, and my mother needed me, sir."

His tone softened at this. "My condolences." Taking a deep breath, he continued, "Now, how would you describe your teaching methods, Miss Steele? My brothers may be a bit behind in their studies. I'm sure Mrs Taylor has made you aware that we lost my mother earlier in the year?"

"Yes, she did. My condolences, as well, My Lord." Elisabeth was starting to feel more at ease now they had found some common ground. The death of a parent, especially one that had been kind and good, was an ordeal to go through at any age. "As to my methods, My Lord, I prefer to use a hands-on approach with my charges. I find that my pupils can absorb the lessons better if they are taught in a fun and engaging way."

Lord Hensol glanced at Mrs Taylor, a grim expression clouding his eyes. "Yes, well. I believe my brothers have had enough of fun and entertainment. They require discipline and structure now." He signalled that the interview was over. "I would like to hire you on a trial basis, Miss Steele, to see if you are a good fit for my brothers. The fact that you have never worked as a governess and have only worked teaching at a girl's school is of some concern to me. Let us see if you are up to the task of teaching rowdy young boys."

She stood as well, curtsying as she had done before. "Yes, My Lord. I shall do my best."

"Miss Steele. I must charge you to adhere to my wishes as regards your teaching style. My brothers have grown far too lax. William needs to

prepare for going off to Eton next year, and Matthew will not be far behind him. No fairytales. Do I have your word on that?"

Elisabeth swallowed. "Yes, sir. As I said, I will do my best to teach them everything they will need."

"Very well. You are dismissed. Mrs Taylor will show you to your quarters." Lord Hensol turned his attention back to his work, seeming to forget she was even standing there.

"Good day, Lord Hensol," Elisabeth mumbled and followed Mrs Taylor out of the room.

"This way." Mrs Taylor took her to the third floor and then up into the attic where the servants' quarters were located. "This is your room. I know it does not look like much, but it's tolerably warm and clean."

Elisabeth had only a moment to look around and deposit her carpetbag on the bed before Mrs Taylor whisked her away again. "Is Lord Hensol always so severe, Mrs Taylor?"

Mrs Taylor smiled knowingly. "Lord Hensol is a very busy man. But he has a good heart. It takes a while for him to warm up to people. Don't take his severity too personally. Just keep your head down and mind what he says. You'll do just fine." They came out of the stairwell on the second floor, coming to the schoolroom door. "Now, I hope you are ready to meet the young Masters Talbot. They can be quite a handful."

"I have two younger brothers, Mrs Taylor. I'm sure I can handle them."

"I certainly hope you can. Good luck." Mrs Taylor turned the knob and left her at the classroom door. Elisabeth suddenly felt nervous,

wondering if the boys would be more work than she had bargained for. She took a deep breath and entered the room, praying they would like her.

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